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# The Rural RISE (Rural Initiatives Supporting Excellence)

Matthew A. Ohlson
*University of North Florida*, matthew.ohlson@unf.edu

Shane C. Shope
*Morehead State University*, shope12@me.com

Jerry D. Johnson
*Kansas State University*, jerry@jdjassociates.net

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# The Rural RISE (Rural Initiatives Supporting Excellence): University-Rural K-12 Collaboration Programs for College and Career Readiness for Rural Students

**Matthew A. Ohlson**
**Shane C. Shope**
**Jerry D. Johnson**

*Faculty from two universities in Florida and Ohio designed, developed, and implemented programs to work with youth from their respective service regions to support college and career readiness initiatives. Both programs were directed by university faculty and utilized university resources to support K-12 students' career development skills. In this paper, we examine the programs' designs, implementations, and results; we include feedback from students, school personnel, and local stakeholders. Attentive to results and the relevant literature, we hope to ignite a long-term discussion on how universities can create effective outreach programs that help support student transitions from high school to college, or directly into a career.*

## Introduction

Career readiness is a common buzzphrase in education that covers an assortment of topics. In this context, we define career readiness as the skill sets graduating high school students need to be employable and productive members of society. Students graduating today need "soft" skills in communication, teamwork, interpersonal interactions, interview techniques, and emotional intelligence, among others. Often students cite a lack of knowledge of how to navigate college and career exploration. The aim of the two programs in this study was to support students during the transition from high school to college or career. The program objectives were to improve K-12 practitioner, student, and stakeholder awareness with respect to college and career readiness (CCR); to build partnerships between K-12, postsecondary, and workforce professionals; and to support students' successful planning for college and career success.

## Literature

### Career Readiness

American business and industry professionals have long been critical of high school career readiness preparation. A shift from a manufacturing-based economy to a more knowledge-based job market has created a demand for a labor force that possesses creativity, adaptability and facility with diversity (Thompson, Cuseo, Shope & Roush, 2019). According to a 2016 report by the Ohio Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation, 47% of current jobs will be phased out by automation, 65% of secondary students are predicted to work in jobs that do not exist currently, and 75% of companies expected to be listed on the S&P 500 do not exist today (Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation, 2016). By 2025, Ohio alone will need 1.7 million more adults with some form of industry credential or degree to meet the demands of the economy. In Florida, despite a growing number of statewide initiatives, fewer than 3% of all students will graduate with an industry credential, and most students graduating from high school were undecided in potential career or college major choice (FLDOE, 2018).

States face barriers of ever-growing populations that are not prepared to enter the workforce. Businesses must recruit and train employees to meet the needs of their customers. Employee interpersonal skills, which are directly related to achieving long-term customer satisfaction, are becoming ever more crucial for career success. Businesses want employees who can adapt, collaborate, communicate, and understand the importance of professional development to their success in the workplace (Herk, 2015). In a 2017 report, the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that employers rated oral and written communication as an essential aspect of career readiness (95.9%) but found that many

employers (41.6%) rated graduates as only somewhat proficient communicators (NACE, 2018). Additionally, an upbeat and positive disposition is a crucial workplace competency (Gordon, 2018).

Despite the common inclination to regard graduation from high school, as the only requisite for college admission or employability, graduates who are not "career ready" find it difficult to obtain employment and thrive in the workplace. They fail to succeed through lack of exposure or not developing and practicing competencies in teamwork and collaboration, interpersonal interactions, leadership, productivity, global perspective, critical thinking, creativity and problem solving (Williams, 2016).

Nationally, the number of effective resources and support structures available to at-risk students throughout their educational careers is declining (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2002; Darling-Hammond, Zielezinski, & Goldman, 2014). More specifically, rural schools often face significant challenges in supporting students beyond the general curriculum due to limited fiscal and human resources and limited access to college and career readiness programs (Reeves, 2003; Wilcox, K. C., Angelis, J. I., Baker, L., & Lawson, H. A., 2014; Zuckerman, 2016). The New Skills for Youth Survey by the Ohio Department of Education (2016), identified several issues regarding CCR education. One was that students and parents felt that not enough career-focused information was being provided; in contrast, educators felt that students were provided a broad range of options. Secondly, many K-5 teachers did not view career preparation as part of their role: nearly 20% of elementary teachers did not include any type of career preparation in their lessons, with many more adding comments that careers cannot and should not be part of the discussion in the early grades. Thirdly, only 39% of school and district administrators felt their teachers were competent to teach career readiness skills, and only 56% of teachers themselves stated that they felt confident integrating career content into their courses. Lastly, 70% of parents felt that their children would benefit greatly from the inclusion of career content in the curriculum; in contrast, many educators had the perception that parents and students did not see the value of career content. This disconnect, between home and school, demonstrates the need to provide CCR skills at the secondary level and for schools to improve communication with parents regarding existing CCR offerings and programs (Adams, 2015; Cushing, Therriault & English, 2019).

Increasingly, state governments and departments of education are requiring high schools to prepare students for college and careers. However, in most cases, such preparation is measured through performance on state-mandated assessments, enrollment in rigorous courses (college prep and Advanced Placement) and credential attainment in the area of career-related technical skills (Education Week, 2018). These measures are legitimate, but in addition to accountability measures, secondary schools need to prepare graduating students' social and emotional development. Students' social and emotional development is critical to their success in college or in the workplace, yet often, with a focus on academic skills, schools provide less opportunity for development of social and emotional skills. Gewertz (2016) found that only 8% of U.S. high school graduates had finished a career readiness program. In many high-need schools, lack of resources prompt administrators to seek engagement, support and leadership from external stakeholders (Bryan, 2005). Collective leadership theory purports that those closest to the problem are best qualified to effectuate systemic and sustainable change. Furthermore, according to collective leadership theory, the individuals on the inside are best to identify, initiate, develop and sustain developmental networks to implement community-engaged initiatives. Participants in the collective leadership process—school and community leaders, parents, local governments and organizations, business people, and interested citizens—form developmental networks that support the schools' service and learning objectives. The necessity for collective leadership is best synopsized in the African proverb–"if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." A major caveat of collective leadership and developmental networks is the need for an understanding of the intra- and inter-personal dynamics that make the relationships work (Fullan, 2007).

It is often argued that the structures of public schools, which are in large part still supporting the old industrial economy, are in drastic need of an overhaul. In the meantime, what can be done to create developmental networks and structures that use local resources to support the development of students' CCR skills during a crucial time in their lives, and also support the economic well being of the state? We describe two examples of "grass-roots" programs that support a greater awareness of career readiness for middle and high school students while

developing a network of resources to expand the connections needed to help students achieve their academic and professional goals.

## Mentoring as a Catalyst for College and Career Readiness

One of the most effective tools to help prepare students for both college and career readiness is mentoring. The programs detailed in this paper each use mentoring as a catalyst for harnessing the collective resources of each partner and participants. The established research further supports the importance of the mutually beneficial  outcomes associated with mentoring including improved self-efficacy, interpersonal and problem solving skills self-esteem, and enhanced communication and social skills- often for both mentor and mentee (Lindt & Blair, 2017; Tierney & Branch, 1992; Wasburn-Moses, Fry & Sanders, 2014; Weiler, Haddock, Zimmerman, Krafchick, Henry, Rudisill, 2013).  In addition, the shared experiences embedded within mentoring are potentially influential contributors to an enhanced sense of autonomy, engagement and a connection to an environment outside of their immediate rural community context (Foukal, Lawrence & Jennings, 2016; Marshall, Lawrence, Williams & Peugh, 2015; Schmidt, Marks & Derrico, 2004).

## The Ohio College & Career Connections Program

Southeast Ohio has long been an area where economic hardships linger for decades following an economic crisis. In many rural counties in the region, the impact of the 2007 recession still lingers. Appalachia has long been a place where resources are continuously exported with minimal gains for many of those who inhabit the area (Caudill, 1963; Eller, 2013; Gaventa, J. 1980; Whisnant, D, 1994). Rural parts of Ohio, specifically in Appalachia, though abundant in raw materials, are often lacking in social capital—a network of friends, family or other acquaintances linked by mutual alliance— necessary to be successful after high school and to navigate college and career systems (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Johnson, Hess, Larson & Wise, 2010; Johnson, Shope & Roush, 2009). First generation college students often find a career path or access to college to be difficult and overwhelming. Many students who start college find it difficult to navigate the college system, become frustrated and return home. Colleges and universities look for ways

to engage first year students but often find it difficult to retain them. Students aspiring to careers right out of high school often do not take the initiative to research the areas of their strengths, interests, or future employers. In the end, students do not make informed choices about their career path, nor do they have the dispositional awareness necessary to be successful.

To address the needs of rural students in Highland, Pike, Clermont, Adams, Lawrence, Scioto, Clinton, Brown and Ross counties, former K-12 practitioners from the area developed and piloted Ohio College & Career Connections Program (O3CP), an intervention program that supports rural Appalachian middle and high school students in their progress toward college and career readiness. Motivation for the program grew out of discussions between two former K-12 practitioners, now university professors, about the personal difficulties they experienced growing up in the region without the social capital needed for college and career success.

## The Partnership

The partnership developed through a long-standing relationship between Southern State Community College (SSCC) and a former local school administrator. SSCC was interested in developing a CCR program that would both serve as a recruiting tool for their programs and provide invaluable information to students. SSCC reached out to a former superintendent from the area and a current faculty member at Morehead State University (MSU) to develop a curriculum that would focus on areas (socio-emotional development, interview techniques, career exploration, financial literacy, etc.) that are so often neglected in the standardized curriculum. Staff from SSCC partnered with a MSU faculty member to present at area high schools throughout southeast Ohio.

This project has always been focused on creating and supporting opportunities for those who go uncounted and unheard, specifically those growing up in Appalachia, where opportunities are limited, and where college is not always an option for the future. The focus of this program is to support students' success in navigating a system that is not always user friendly to those who are not proficient in working within it. The program supports student success no matter the student's ability level, locale, or socio-economic status. Program coordinators made

contacts with area school administrators' grades 8-12 to gauge their interest in the program. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

Schools were selected based on state school report card data and existing connections between presenters and school administrators. Local community colleges invited students at participating schools to further investigate existing programs and research possible career choices. In addition, community college faculty and other university professors invited students at participating schools to participate in a panel discussion on topics that included information on available majors and how to be successful in college. Twelve schools were selected to participate in the two-year pilot program. A two-year grant to SSCC from the Ohio Department of Higher Education provided the funding for the program. A total of 320 students in grades 8-12 participated in the seminars that took place at each of the participating schools. Follow-up sessions were provided to schools that requested additional support for their students. Students were selected to participate based on their school's specific criteria regarding whether that was a group of "at-risk" or college bound students.

**The Program**

The mentoring process at each school consists of one 2-3-hour small group session. Two former K-12 teacher/administrators (one university professor and one community college administrator) facilitate a discussion with 25-30 students from grades 8-12. Schools are selected based on the presenters' familiarity with the district and staff, and word of mouth reccomendations. Typically, teachers and other school personnel are present as well. Discussions focus on practical approaches to support student development in CCR areas that are not typically taught in the general curriculum but that are transferable to any setting. During the sessions students are strongly encouraged to interrupt and ask questions related to the specific topics. The focus is on making a connection with each student and promoting a two-way dialog between presenters and students, which supports both engagement and effective feedback on the topics each student group brings to the seminar.

The discussions that take place with students are upbeat and positive, to help each student define their own success. The unique aspect of the program is its emphasis on supporting any choice students make for their future. The program encourages post-secondary education but the focus is on supporting all choices. Each student is valued and encouraged to reflect on what they want for their future. This approach promotes self-discovery and pushes students to explore possibilities. With each topic students are encouraged to explore deeply any area of interest. The presenters were born and raised in the area and they use their own stories to relate to students during the presentation. The program attempts to demonstrate the skills outlined in the presentation through engaging and relevant information that encourages students to search for pathways that support the career aspirations no matter where they come from or who they are as a person.

As each student enters the room they are immediately met with a firm handshake, an enthusiastic greeting, and direct eye contact. The presenters focus on making personal connections with each student, even with those that are reluctant to engage the materials. An essential part of the program is making a personal connection to each student. Personal strengths, interests, and areas of development that need attention within the parameters of CCR remain a continuous theme throughout the seminar. Anecdotal references are shared to provide context and promote meaning making. In addition, students are encouraged to ask questions and make comments throughout the seminar. To keep the program student centered, the initial discussion focuses on what students want to do after they graduate from high school. Students complete an online interest inventory that helps generate individual discussions on personal interests that match various career opportunities. Further discussion is dedicated to concepts such as earning potential, soft skill development, interview techniques, understanding cultural differences in the work place, financial literacy standards, and career exploration resources. Peer to peer and presenter to student discussion facilitation methods are used to encourage open dialogue and questions during the seminar, to maintain the students' interest, and to guide the discussion to the needs and interests of the attendees. Prezi presentations are used to present content, and they contain embedded videos and short interest inventories. Interactive activities include interest inventories, personality and grit assessment tools, and team-building exercises. Through collaborative efforts with local practitioners and the representatives from local postsecondary institutions, students are exposed to resources that they can use to create their own transition program from middle

school to high school and college, and into the workforce. Several short videos are shown to help with engagement and prompt discussions on a specific topic of importance (e.g., interview techniques, financial literacy, soft-skill development and grit). Students are divided into teams for a team-building activity known as the "Marshmallow Challenge" (The Leadership Challenge, 2018), in which teams of students build a structure out of tape, string, spaghetti, and a marshmallow.

Upon completion of the program each participant receives a career readiness certificate to present to potential employers or an academic institution as a component of their professional portfolio. As a pseudo-graduation ceremony, we shake every student's hand and congratulate them on their completion of the program. The difference between the students' initial and final handshakes is noteworthy, at the completion of the program, students demonstrate their achievement of a simple skill that can help them to create a good impression in the future. Students are encouraged to take the presenters' business cards to enable them to reach out to the presenters for future questions they might have about college or career selection. Follow-up sessions with participating schools and individual students are scheduled on request to help support further student growth, and to serve as a reminder of the skills learned in the initial seminar.

On several occasions because of proximity to the area where the presenters live and work, many students engage presenters in conversations about the lessons from the presentations. Some students discussed the importance and use of soft-skills when working with customers and the general public, and shared that the skills learned from the program have provided pathways to success that they had not considered before participation. Students want, and need, to know how to navigate all the systems they come into contact with on a daily basis whether be the education, business or the day to day business of a citizen. All represent a system of human organization that requires a basic knowledge of how to navigate successfully (McDaniel, Yarbrough, & Besnoy, 2015).

**The Impact**

After visiting several schools throughout south central and southeast Ohio we were struck by the desire and need for CCR support across the region. School staff overwhelmingly supported the process,

often commenting on the value of the content, and impact it had on the students. Two of the twelve schools were eager to have the program return for a second year. Additional schools developed their own programs based on the material presented in the first year. In the future, the university and college presenters intend to continue to provide the traveling seminars on an annual basis. The face-to-face mode will be updated and continued, and an online version for teachers to utilize within the regular curriculum will be developed.

Teacher and administrator comments highlighted the positive influences of the program with their students. The principal of Greenfield McClain High School reported,

The program engaged my students with their college and career readiness presentation. The program reinforced or introduced beneficial information that can't always be covered in the high school curriculum. My students are better for it! The overwhelming, positive student feedback has helped me to determine that our school district will plan on implementing the workbook into our career readiness curriculum.

A teacher at Franklin Furnace Green High School stated,

I thought the program provided a real-life glance of the scenarios they will be facing as high school graduates. For example, many students do not think about finances or interview skills but as they come to grips with reality, these skills are pertinent. The program explained the importance of these everyday life skills as well as some planning for the future. Students were making statements about how engaging the program was and how the presenters made it personable for each of them as they felt connected. We greatly appreciate the time and efforts in coming to our district to discuss this program with our seniors. We welcome the opportunity to have you back next year for our upcoming seniors.

A guidance counselor commented on the program's impact:

One young man told me the program provided useful resources to help him better understand what steps to take for his career goals. Since then, he has set up a job shadow and visited a college. In addition, another young lady shared that the content of the presentation encouraged her to set higher self-expectations. Now, she is

*Table One: Student Feedback from CCR Program*

| Survey Prompt | Likert Rating Scale (1=SD - 5=SA) |
|---|---|
| The content of the presentation was engaging and provided relevant information. | 4.63 |
| The content was well organized. | 4.71 |
| The presentation met my expectations | 4.40 |
| The information provided was helpful in my future planning for life after high school. | 4.55 |
| The information presented has motivated me to explore future career opportunities. | 4.46 |
| The presenters were well prepared and organized for today's seminar. | 4.72 |

focused on improving her ACT score and investigating top colleges for her career field. Student feedback was collected via researcher-developed written surveys using a five-point Likert Scale. Well over 300 students participated in the one-day seminars. As shown in Table 1, 90% or more of students strongly agreed or agreed that the presentation was engaging and relevant, that the content was well organized, that the presentation met expectations, that the information was useful and motivated future career exploration, and that the presenters were well prepared. The item receiving the least positive ratings was *The presentation met my expectations*. We attributed this to the fact most students were selected to participate in the program. Students were asked what they gained from the seminar that was most important to them. Common responses were empathy, and understanding other people; soft skills; how to prepare for interviews and how to talk to people; financial literacy; not to let anyone else define my success; teamwork; very motivational, eye opening into why and how to get into my field of interest.

### CAMP Osprey

Rural school districts surrounding the University of North Florida (UNF) face numerous challenges in creating rigorous and meaningful CCR learning experiences for students when access to and information related to higher education are scarce. Putnam County in Florida is a region with very high poverty and dropout rates—within the top 5% consistently in the last 10 years—in the state. While neighboring urban districts implemented multi-million-dollar college readiness initiatives, rural districts such as Putnam had difficulty creating a sustainable model for students to attain the skills needed to access higher education.

The Collegiate Achievement Mentoring Program (CAMP) Osprey is a leadership mentoring program where student leaders from UNF serve as mentors to at-risk elementary and middle school students. To overcome geographic and financial barriers faced by rural school partners, CAMP Osprey utilizes videoconferencing technology and virtual mentoring to teach students from rural communities how to become college and career ready. At UNF, the process begins by identifying exemplary students to serve as leadership mentors. Each week, depending on proximity, UNF student mentors meet with elementary and middle school students from rural counties. The sessions focus on building confidence, time management, goal setting, and personal branding. The culminating event of the program is a trip to tour the UNF campus.

### The Partnership

The partnership grew out of personal and professional connections between UNF faculty in the College of Education and Human Services and administrators and teachers in neighboring school districts. To address the needs of rural districts distant from UNF, we implemented a web-based mentoring partnership, with weekly videoconferences between UNF student mentors and rural school students, and virtual visits to the UNF campus. UNF students serve as mentors. Technology needs for videoconferencing are supported by UNF's Center for Instruction and Research Technology (CIRT), and UNF faculty manage the program. Partner schools are selected based on a variety of criteria including proximity to UNF (for the face-to-face mentoring component), age of students (grades 4-8 have seen the largest gains) and investment in the program as demonstrated by the commitment of at least one school staff member who will help monitor the mentoring sessions and serve as a dedicated liaison between the university

and each school site. The students' teachers and school administrators select the individual K-12 students who participate, because they are perceived to have potential, but to be at risk of underachieving based on personal difficulties. Some examples of candidates for inclusion may be a student who was doing well academically before her parents went through a divorce, or a star athlete who is struggling academically. Mentoring matches between mentor and mentee, as well as student performance are monitored to ensure the process is having the greatest impact on students.

The CAMP program has partnered with over 30 partner schools in four states. At least 70% of students in most participating schools qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. In the 2016-2017 academic year, UNF partnered with schools in its home county of Duval (FL), in addition to urban and suburban schools in St. Johns and Miami-Dade (FL), and rural schools in Flagler (FL), Putnam (FL) and Wake (NC) counties, and Milford Independent School District (TX).

Not every school is a fit for the program and schools have been asked to leave the mentoring network based on their lack of fidelity of the process or the level of support provided to students. For example, we no longer offer mentoring services to schools that have failed to provide sufficient supervision of mentoring sessions, and effectively communicate schedule changes. When these situations occur, we first attempt to address the problem with open communication, but with continued issues we prioritize the safety of the students and fidelity of the program, and end the mentoring partnership with that school.

**The Program**

Initially, all mentors were students in a designated section of an Introduction to Leadership course, which is the foundational course in UNF's Leadership Minor. Students who take the leadership course are from a variety of majors and backgrounds. In academic year 2016-2017, members of UNF athletic teams, many of which have an NCAA required service component, were added as mentors.

Leadership mentoring constitutes a substantial portion of the course curriculum in the Introduction to Leadership course. The first phase of the course teaches students the characteristics of effective leadership and leadership best practices from seminal texts such as Covey's (1989) *The 7 Habits of Highly*

*Effective People* and Kotter's (1996) *Leading Change*. The course includes topics such as: preparing a personal mission and vision, aligning actions with values, finding one's voice and strengths, time management, and workplace etiquette including appropriate dress and behavior.

Early in the course, mentors participate in eight hours of face-to-face training with the course instructor, specifically focused on best practices for leadership mentoring and the practicalities of mentor-mentee interaction. Outlines and deliverables of weekly mentoring sessions are laid out in a best practice mentoring guide developed by a cadre of mentors (Ohlson, 2018). The training mentors receive helps them feel confident in their ability to get their mentoring relationship off to a good start. The training program is unique in that mentors not only learn important leadership skills, but also teach them to their mentees, thereby reinforcing their own learning. Student athletes and volunteers not enrolled in the course receive a condensed version of mentor training. Mentors are trained in student and school safety strategies to ensure the well being of the program and all participants.

When possible, the mentoring sessions are face-to-face. Weekly mentoring sessions take place at the partner schools and last for 60 minutes, with each mentoring group consisting of one collegiate mentor and two or three K-12 mentees. Mentoring sessions are always supervised by K-12 staff and, when possible, by a member of the UNF program team. Activities are scripted in the mentoring guide and focus on leadership development and college and career readiness skills.

The mentors are taught how to lead their mentoring sessions via their experience in the leadship course. These sessions consist of relationship building, a leadership activity, establishing and monitoring the achievement of personal goals, creating time management plans, and learning life skills and college and career readiness. Working together, both collegiate mentors and K-12 mentees create personal mission statements and leadership portfolios. Through learning activities such as how to prioritize daily activities, properly shake someone's hand, or modeling positive behaviors, mentors and mentees develop strong, meaningful relationships. Periodically, K-12 mentees come to UNF for activities such as talking to a faculty member, participating in a soccer or art clinic, or having their mentor show them a lab, a residence hall room, the lazy river, or the climbing wall.

Leadership development is as comprehensive as possible; for example on occasion prior to visiting campus, mentors have taken their mentees shopping for clothes so they can look professional and feel comfortable. The campus visit is an important part of the program, because research suggests that when students gain familiarity with a college campus, there is an increased likelihood that they will consider going to college (King, 2012), and perhaps consider UNF as a future collegiate home. Such recruiting also benefits UNF as it seeks to expand its reach to underrepresented communities. At the end of the semester the collegiate mentors and the K-12 mentees together present their leadership portfolios at the K-12 mentees' school.

When working with schools that are located at a distance from UNF, for example with rural partner schools, mentoring meetings take place via videoconferencing and follow the same structure as face-to-face sessions. With the support of UNF's CIRT and Cisco Technologies, collegiate mentors and K-12 mentees in distant partner schools communicate in real time, share files, and participate in virtual field trips facilitated by a UNF faculty or staff member who travels to the partner school. In the first semester of virtual mentoring (Spring 2016), to accommodate technology limitations, as many as 10 to 12 mentees were present in one mentoring session, facilitated by four to six mentors. In the second academic year, a single mentoring session was limited to two mentors and four to six mentees, with the two groups alternating in their use of the connection. Expansion to virtual mentoring increased the total number of mentees, as well as access for high-need student groups. When virtual mentoring was implemented, the number of mentees and the numbers of Latino and high-poverty rural mentees increased by 44%, 29%, and 38% respectively.

**The Impact**

The ability to reach schools rural schools isolated by distance and resources has had a significantly positive impact. One such school is Mellon Elementary in Palatka, FL (Putnam County). The Principal recognized the benefit of the program by stating, "Students participating in this college preparation program through mentoring and course work have felt a lift in spirits and the students have shown a renewed vigor in their academics and outlook." He further pointed out that programs such as this provide "extra focus and effort" that can be

beneficial to their students "enabling them to succeed as they continue through school." The school administration was excited about the results of the program and the prospects of continuing this partnership. One proclaimed, "I am excited to continue the program and expand it in the second semester. I already have a waiting list of students who want to be part of this wonderful experience…Opportunities like this don't come very often in our poor, rural district and we are so thankful to be able to participate in an enriching program like CAMP Osprey."

The student mentors also reported significant gains from the mentoring experience. At the end of Spring 2017, all 44 of the collegiate mentors responded to the question "How have you grown because of this leadership mentoring experience?" Content analysis of survey responses revealed that the most frequently mentioned words were leadership (35 mentions); positive (31); better, collaboration (17 each); listen, learn (9); goals, grown (8); involvement (7); and community, patience (6 each). Reflections included in the mentors' leadership portfolios identified other gains: recognition of the value of relationships, the value of the ability to positively influence, and appreciation of diversity; influence of the experience on mentors' post-college career plans; improved leadership acumen; and enhanced ability to apply leadership principles.

Mentee reflections were collected via leadership portfolios, which the students prepared as part of the mentoring sessions. The credibility of mentors, simply by virtue of their position as "educated" college students, was attested by one mentee who stated, "They're in college so they can tell you what to look forward to and how hard you have to work [to succeed]." The recognition of improvement was pointed out by one mentee who stated, "I'm going to miss CAMP Osprey. My grades have gone up since I joined you guys and I am a better leader now." Another mentee shared a similar notion: "I feel more confident when I talk to adults and my teachers because of CAMP Osprey, and I've been doing better in school and getting in trouble a lot less." An additional aspect of recognized improvement was conveyed by a mentee who reflected, "I see how my classmates treat each other better than they did before and I think we all get along better in school because our mentors have been working with us on how to be more positive about ourselves and others." The notion of increased optimism about the future was shared by one mentee: "I'll be sad when I don't see

my mentor every week anymore because she taught me about what I can look forward to in college and we talked about the things I can start doing now to help me get there." Another mentee expressed gratitude for being included in the program: "I was so glad I was picked for this program because it has helped me a lot to grow and be a better leader and student all around. Thank you CAMP Osprey!"

Teachers and principals reported that K-12 mentees demonstrated improvements in attendance (11% decrease in excessive absences), behavior (7% decrease in suspensions), and academic achievement (9% gain in student GPA; Ohlson, Lerman, Theobold, & Jamison, 2017). Future examination of factors such as attendance, retention, graduation rates, and college attendance rates is expected to help schools at all levels inform their organizational policies and practices.

This replicable, mutually beneficial model has been honored with awards from the NPR's American Graduate Champion, the United Way, and the National Jefferson Service Foundation. Exemplary academic programs such as this not only teach students content but also, more importantly, allow students the opportunity to put skills into action (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). The CAMP Osprey curriculum focuses on student-centered leadership training, service-learning opportunities, and a cycle of engagement between mentors and mentees. The model creates a learning environment in which theory and practice are integrated, allowing students the opportunity to teach and practice the leadership theories and techniques learned in class. Such effective learning opportunities help a student determine what they hope to achieve after graduation and obtain the skills, motivation, and opportunities to reach those goals (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). The mentoring experience is a powerful medium to connect diverse people to their communities. UNF student interns in local K-12 schools are typically white females, who represent 80% of the students in UNF's teacher education programs. CAMP Osprey collegiate mentors, on the other hand, are diverse in terms of gender, race, age, sexual identity, majors, and career interests. More than 70% of mentors and 84% of mentees identify as part of a minortized group, and are thus reflective of the demographic groups that are underrepresented in today's workforce and on college campuses. For 56% of collegiate mentors, this was their first experience working with high-poverty, majority-minority schools. The CAMP program facilitates learning and collaboration between diverse groups in terms of age, ethnicity, gender and income, and embraces the notion of synergy within a leadership context. The demographics of the student mentors may also help address a need for minority students in the fields of education, public service, and leadership. On a national level, the number of educators whose racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds match those of their students is declining (Ingersoll & May, 2011). By developing a flexible, student-centered program that introduces the field of education, CAMP Osprey may increase minority recruitment into the field (Diversi & Mecham, 2004).

## Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Although the Ohio College & Career Connections and CAMP Osprey programs differ in the, types of strategies utilized, targeted grade levels, duration, and location, they share a common objective to support capacity building for underserved rural students. Collectively, the work demonstrates how two universities provided approaches to meet the needs of rural students in Ohio and Florida. These grass-root and unique approaches underscore the complex and comprehensive needs of rural youth in each part of the country. Each program highlights specific needs and skill sets to build capacity for rural student populations in college and career readiness. Though each program has its specific objectives and delivery, both programs provide support to first generation and low-income students, by encouraging attainment of a college education.

### Mutually Beneficial Outcomes

Both programs provide examples of how universities can create and support outreach plans for the greater good of rural communities, and support the demands for college attendance and degree attainment. Universities could benefit from these programs in multiple ways. First, colleges and universities should consider investing in such initiatives as rural student populations represent an untapped source of student enrollment. Second, beyond recruitment of rural student populations, colleges and universities could use programs such as these to proactively look for ways to build capacity of incoming students that could help with transition to college, and retention of students from rural populations. Additionally, universities have a responsibility to consider and support the long-term

economic well-being of the communities they serve, and outreach programs such as CAMP Osprey and O3CP can support this goal. Finally, building partnerships with rural communities can offer authentic opportunities for college staff, faculty, and students to learn in a new setting, that can help to increase comfort in working with diverse populations. For example, the CAMP Osprey faculty are examining the impact of their leadership mentoring partnership in Texas with the one K-12 school of 400 students in the entire rural district. This district, less than 30 miles from Dallas, has seen drastic gains in numerous areas through the use of virtual mentoring, and the unique school setting allows researchers to tracks participants throughout their school career. In addition, the work with O3CP build capacities for rural students to enter the work force or college and beyond. Efforts are in place to expand the work into Kentucky and throughout Ohio.

## Best Practices

A variety of best practices and strategies emerged from this data, that shed light on how each program could benefit rural students and universities in a mutually beneficial, cost effective way. Garringer, Kupersmidt, Rhodes, Stelter & Tai, T. (2015), identified several variables impacting successful mentoring programs that include the following: geographic isolation, limited population bases, limited community infrastructure and resources, limited to no public transportation, a distrust of services that orginate outside of the community and issues related to substance abuse, violence, poverty and family dynamics. Successful mentoring programs focus on integrating services with partners, mimizing geographic isolation by delivering services face to face, and being in the community on a regular basis to build trust and rapport. In addition, mentoring programs should use technology to connect to paticipants.  Both of the programs described here have these charactisteristics, which could explain their positive results (Garringer et. al.  2015). In particular, one such strategy is to focus on a selective rural location and offer an abundance of support. This strategy allows for examination of the impact of the partnership between the university and K-12 school, and for measurement of both short and long-term gains. For example, in the rural sections of Flagler County (FL), the leadership development support of both school faculty and students has resulted in increased

retention of teachers. In addition, consistent support of students from middle school through high school has resulted in a reduced dropout rate (21% of program participants as compared to their peers) as well as three students from this one community who now attend UNF.

Beyond focused support in high-needs rural areas, analysis of the two programs illustrates the importance of mentors to serve as the support conduit. Professional development and workshops for both staff and students has shown limited long-term success, while consistent and timely mentoring has shown to lead to significant and lasting gains when accounting for staff success and retention (Guskey, 2002) In terms of student growth, the relationships developed and lessons reinforced through mentoring have shown to decrease at-risk behaviors and increase student academic and behavioral gains (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005; Eby, Rhodes & Allen, 2007; Keeler et al., 2018; Diversi & Mecham, 2004). Finally, the consistency and presence of a mentor in a rural community fortifies the importance of valuing these communities. Rather than a "visit" from university faculty to provide lessons on how to improve on a variety of fronts, having a mentor embedded within the rural schools and communities shows that the partnership is valued, and the rural setting is a learning resource (Bauch, 2001; Garringer, et. al. (2015).

### Future Research and Program Expansion/Replication

Future work should continue to look at ways to increase dialogue with colleges and universities to support rural students and their ability to attend college and graduate. Historically rural students have been entwined in the "opportunity gap"- limited in their opportunities for curricular and extra-curricular capacities to support their academic, socio-emotional, and career readiness development (Carter & Welner, 2013). The resources available on college campuses could ignite rural student engagement and increase interest in attending higher education, which could expand the admissions and enrollment base for many universities that are looking to increase diversity and enrollment. For example, UNF recently started to use the virtual mentoring model with CAMP Osprey and began piloting a rural school leadership program where college faculty mentor beginning teachers and principals in an effort to increase retention and offer a pipeline to the university's graduate programs. This

type of partnership could transform the type of support being offered to schools to include both students and staff while developing a more consistent stream of qualified candidates for both graduate and undergraduate students.

The O3CP is currently being considered for use in state level initiates to build capacity for low income rural students in Kentucky and Ohio. The need for college graduates will increase because of the demands placed on employers to hire the best prepared employees as possible. For many rural students, the issue is not having the knowledge and opportunities to take advantage of a college

education. O3CP is one grassroots example of how to close the opportunity gap.

Beyond the immediate stakeholders of colleges and universities along with their K-12 rural partners, it is imperative for state and federal policymakers to consider such initiatives to continue to build upon the current work. Rural communities are home to an abundant number of students looking to become college and career ready, and countless universities in need of highly motivated and qualified students. Policymakers and stakeholders should offer clear and consistent incentives for these types of mutually beneficial partnerships.

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**Authors:**

**Matthew A. Ohlson** is the Director of the Taylor Leadership Institute and Associate Professor of Leadership at the University of North Florida. Contact: matthew.ohlson@unf.edu

**Shane Shope** is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership Program at Morehead State University. Contact: shope12@me.com

**Jerry Johnson** is Chair of Educational Leadership and the Lydia E. Skeen Endowed Professor in Education at Kansas State University. Contact: johnsoj9@ksu.edu