



WE ARE LISTENING!

RERIC partners with rural Wisconsin

Lynn Armitage

A few years back, Jack Jorgensen and his colleagues were driving back to Madison from the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance 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 Wisconsin Collaborative Education Research 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 has been full speed ahead. In the fall of 2018, the Wisconsin Center for Education Research launched the Rural Education Research & Implementation Center. The first-of-its-kind center in Wisconsin is dedicated to improving educational outcomes for rural students, families and schools through rigorous, partnership-based research.

RERIC is led by co-directors Craig Albers and Andy Garbacz, who are both associate professors of educational psychology at UW-Madison. It is a full-circle moment for Albers, whose parents still live on 80 acres of land near Medford, Wis., where he grew up.

“It’s given me an extra hop in my step because now I have this personal connection to my work,” Albers says.

Garbacz also has a rural background and worked at the National Center for Research on Rural Education while he was a postdoctoral fellow. In building capacity for RERIC, the co-directors have operated on two guiding principles — to listen and to establish trust with rural residents and education leaders.

“We know from Katherine Cramer’s book, ‘The Politics of Resentment,’ how crucial it is to establish trust with rural communities,” Albers says. “We’ve made it a priority to talk to people in rural Wisconsin, get to know them and hear their challenges. People tell us, ‘Thanks for recognizing that we’re here.’”



Dr. Andy Garbacz (left) and Dr. Craig Albers

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■ Collaboration is the cornerstone

Rural Wisconsin faces many educational challenges. How does RERIC determine which of those need immediate attention? Through numerous focus groups and conversations with stakeholders across the state, the RERIC team identified five urgent research strands to ground the center: mental and behavioral health; teacher preparation, recruitment and retention; STEM education; equity and diversity; and research preparation and training.

It appears to be a heavy job for one research center. However, RERIC’s core team of Albers, Garbacz, Jorgensen and project manager Jackie Roessler quickly discovered that collaborations and partnerships are the keys to success.

Garbacz is especially grateful for a strong contingent of hard-working graduate and undergraduate students enthusiastic about rural education.

“It’s so fun to see the progress we’ve made in expanding the reach to students on campus,” he explains. “They are the future, the directors and individuals who will one day make decisions about what gets funded.”

According to Albers, the concept of RERIC is to bring people together from different areas. To do that successfully requires a skilled matchmaker like Jorgensen, who is RERIC’s associate director for outreach and networking. “My role has been to make new connections and leverage relationships I have already established,” says Jorgensen, who facilitated key relationships on campus and with external partners while at the Wisconsin Collaborative Education Research Network.

One longstanding relationship Jorgensen developed is with Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance Executive Director Kim Kaukl, who says, “Jack and I have been talking for many years about how to get better research in rural Wisconsin.” Kaukl is especially concerned about the flight of families out of rural Wisconsin due to a lack of employment opportunities.

“If we can work with legislators on rural economic development, it will help people stay in rural Wisconsin and stem the tide of declining enrollment, one of the biggest problems facing rural schools,” Kaukl says.

“We are so appreciative of RERIC advocating for us at a higher level,” says Ben Niehaus, superintendent of the School District of Florence County and president of the executive board for the rural schools’ alliance. “We cover large areas up here, but our voice is small.”

The annual Teacher Speakout! is RERIC’s signature listening and learning event. The multi-day symposium on the UW-Madison campus offers a collaborative environment for the state’s rural K-12 teachers, education researchers and state policymakers

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to discuss the most pressing education issues facing Wisconsin’s rural classrooms. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Teacher Speakout! did not take place this fall.

■ **A focus on mental and behavioral health issues**

Albers and Garbacz report that mental and behavioral health in rural Wisconsin is a “public health crisis,” and RERIC is leading the charge to make mental health support accessible for students and families in rural areas. Most mental health programs are developed for larger communities that have the bandwidth to offer backup support from school psychologists, social workers or counselors.

“In small, rural communities and schools, these mental health professionals are not available,” says Albers. “We hear stories about families in rural school districts that have to drive two hours each way to take their children to a mental health professional. When you do the math, it’s

an all-day affair to get there, sit through the appointment and drive back home.”

To help resolve the dire need for more customized mental health programs in rural communities, RERIC launched FOCUS Partnerships — one of its largest projects to date. The project, which stands for families, organizations, community, university and schools, is made possible by a grant from Grand Challenges, a special initiative through UW-Madison’s School of Education that is intended “to identify and address critical problems in education, health and the arts.”

After three years of collaboration with rural parents, teachers and community stakeholders through FOCUS Partnerships, RERIC is ready to implement mental health programs centered on prevention, promotion and early intervention within rural schools this fall.

“Of course, everything is up in the air with the pandemic,” says Albers. “But we hope to evaluate the

effectiveness of our approaches to rural mental health issues and get feedback from families, educators and students to see if we can customize our programs even further according to the unique characteristics of each individual school district. It really is an iterative process.”

An important component of RERIC’s FOCUS project is the development of mental and behavioral health literacy materials with a twist.

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Albers asserts that most literacy programs focus on kids in crisis. RERIC aims to focus on kids before they get to the crisis stage.

“We often hear from educators and parents, ‘I am not a mental health professional. I don’t know what to do,’” Albers says. “So we have designed our mental health literacy piece to give them the knowledge and skills to be involved early on with their students’ and children’s mental and behavioral health, and well-being issues, before they may have to seek out a psychologist.”

■ RERIC’s long-term vision

RERIC has made strides in the two years since the center was launched at WCER. Important collaborations are underway with other stakeholders in rural education, such as the Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Response to Intervention Center and the University Alliance at UW-Madison.

“If the Department of Public Instruction or a district in northwestern Wisconsin, for example, are facing some challenges, we would love for them to think of RERIC first when they are looking for answers,” says Albers, adding that if RERIC cannot provide the solution, they will find someone who can. “We want to be a clearinghouse for people, to connect them with our partners and the vast resources we have available to us through UW-Madison.”

Most importantly, Albers and Garbacz want educators and parents in rural communities to know that the RERIC team is always available to listen.

“Tell us what your issues and strengths are. We will work with you and give you some ideas,” says Albers. “Let’s partner to figure this out.” ■

Lynn Armitage is a senior university relations specialist with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at UW-Madison.

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