IEP CATEGORY • TALENT

Project Heart, Operation LINK, and STEM-Corps East
In 2016, 22 of the counties served by ECU were classified by the North Carolina Department of Commerce as Tier 1, at the highest level of economic distress. The NC Department of Public Instruction reported that the 2014-2015 Percentage of Students Achieving Scores of Level 4 or 5(Career/College Ready) in these counties ranged from 31.2-46.5. According to a 2013 report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 65% of all available jobs in 2020 will require individuals to have some form of postsecondary education or training.1 Our ENC students are not college ready and this educational challenge is one that the ECU College of Education (ECU-COE) takes seriously.

After a visit to ENC, UNC President Margaret Spelling said, “ECU is facing that challenge head-on, and it’s one of the finest examples of direct public service anywhere in the UNC system” In order to effectively meet the challenge, the ECU-COE developed innovative projects to connect tutors from ECU, community colleges and high schools with school children in ENC using AmeriCorps funding. These tutors receive a cost of living award and upon completion of the required service hours, the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award which pays for their post secondary education. Breaking the cycle of poverty, enabling career development, and addressing expressed community needs, ECU-COE AmeriCorps programs have created a win-win solution.

In 2000, ECU-COE attained AmeriCorps funding to begin a 16-year commitment to providing academic enrichment via tutors and coaches to students living in ENC. This commitment has included Project HEART, Operation LINK, and STEM Corps-East.

From 2000 to 2013 Project HEART (High Expectations for At-Risk Teens) placed tutors in schools, on college campuses and in afterschool programs to help high-risk kids in eastern North Carolina. Its aims were to help struggling students stay in school, graduate, go to college and return to their community to help others. Between 2000 and 2013, 1,284 college and high students served as tutors for more than 20,000 students in as many as 10 counties in the east. All totaled these tutors provided more than 840,600 hours of service to the schools in eastern North Carolina. In 2010, AmeriCorps selected Project HEART as one of the 52 most innovative programs in the nation.

Using lessons learned from Project HEART, ECU-COE continued its work with AmeriCorps and from 2013-2016 implemented Operation LINK. More than 180 AmeriCorps members served in Operation LINK and leveraged an additional 650 volunteers who provided mentoring services from 2015-2016 to approximately 1289 military children and youth in after school programs in Craven, Cumberland, Onslow, and Wayne counties in North Carolina. Program participants who attended 75% or more of mentoring sessions increased their level of connectedness to school, family, and community as measured by the 1) Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness, 2) Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) and 3) Self Esteem Questionnaire.
In 2016 STEM-Corps East will become the third AmeriCorps initiative and it is designed to help K-8 students who are struggling to master STEM concepts. East Carolina University proposes to place 54 AmeriCorps members in public schools in Beaufort, Lenoir, and Pitt counties to serve as STEM tutors. The primary outcome is to help students master math and science concepts. Specific objectives of the project include an increase in student interest in STEM activities and STEM-related careers as well as an increase in student achievement in Mathematics. In addition, AmeriCorps members will leverage approximately 200 volunteers who will be engaged in STEM Fairs and community service activities.

These three initiatives have several key components in common. Strong community partnerships and the program’s personal, coaching-based approach are common to all three. All three use a process building on “relationships our tutors build with the kids whom they serve” according to Betty Beacham, the Director of the programs.

The program also teaches its tutors how to be leaders and build in them a habit of service and helping others. "The expectation is that they are going to internalize this and they are always going to give back to their communities, they are going to be the leaders in their communities," said Beacham.

The three initiatives, while sharing common values and beliefs, were designed to meet the needs of the communities they served in a timely and relevant manner. Project HEART focused on reading. Project LINK focused on connecting military children to society through structured after school activities, to parents through team based activities around the Internet-based Robot program, and to their communities through Super Saturdays and summer camps. Due to its community connectedness focus, it expanded its partners beyond the schools to community-based organizations. STEM-Corps East will circle back around and use the HEART model while incorporating community-based organizations and robots that were so valuable in LINK.

The impact on local communities includes increased learning for student participants, use of Segal awards for degree attainment of tutors, and strengthened networks between school and community organizations. According to Virginia Harris, a retired teacher and military spouse and participant in Operation LINK, “I’ve seen changes in the students, being able to work together and learning to follow rules better,” Harris said. “One of the main things they learn is you’re not an island. You have to get along with people in life. I think it’s difficult for little people to work together as a team sometimes.”

The impact on tutors goes beyond the living allowance and Segal award. Tutors develop leadership skills and a service ethic. "It has changed my view of how I will approach being a doctor," said Alvin Tsang, 21, a Project HEART tutor, psychology major at ECU and aspiring student at the Brody School of Medicine. "It's really not a job; it’s a service you provide.... It’s not about a
paycheck or a salary," he said. "It's about you wanting to help other people."