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Cover Page Footnote

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Regional Engagement through the Rogers Explorers Program: Linking Higher Education to Appalachian Counties

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A key contribution of regional, comprehensive universities should be the development of meaningful and effective programs that will further the communities within their service areas. One example of an effective regional engagement program is highlighted in the following reflection. For five years, the Rogers Explorers program has introduced high school students to higher education. These transitioning eighth graders (many of whom would be first-generation college students) are introduced to critical and creative thinking, teamwork, and leadership development skills during the summer program. This reflection was developed by two university professors who took part in the Rogers Explorers program in an effort to further explain the benefits of the experience which could serve as a national best practice example for regional engagement.

“No young person should have to leave home to find his or her future.”
– U.S. Congressman Harold “Hal” Rogers

A critical function of a regional comprehensive university is to provide effective community engagement and regional stewardship. Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) has a long tradition of service to its region, which spans 22 southeastern Kentucky counties throughout the Appalachian region. Through its diverse programs and initiatives, ECU has worked to deliver regional opportunities by linking university resources and knowledge to the needs and challenges of local communities (EKU Regional Stewardship Strategic Plan, 2009). The ability to collaborate with other community organizations in the execution of this targeted outreach is fundamental in obtaining successful outcomes. One example of this collaboration is a fifteen-year partnership with The Center for Rural Development (CRD) in Somerset, Kentucky. The CRD is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing leadership that generates innovative and sustainable economic development solutions and a better way of life for the citizens in their service region. While the CRD serves a region of 42 southeastern Kentucky counties, many of the counties in the region are shared between ECU and the CRD. This commonality allows for targeted outreach to the students in Appalachia through collaboration on various programs such as Rogers Explorers.

In an effort to highlight the value of the program to the Appalachian service region, the following manuscript will overview the Rogers Explorers program's mission of introducing higher education opportunities, while potentially reducing associated anxieties, to upcoming high school students from the Appalachian region. The mission is critical for the service region due to the fact that the number of adults with a bachelor's degree in Appalachia (20.4%) is significantly lower than the national average of 27.5%. Specifically, in the majority of Appalachian counties (349 of 420), less than one-fifth of adults are graduates of a four-year college or university (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2011).

After outlining the program's background, the authors will describe its value by citing feedback from recent graduates. Additionally, the authors (two university faculty members) will reflect on their experiences of providing instruction to the students in the Rogers Explorers program. Finally, the merit of, and ability to, replicate the program in other communities will be explored.

Rogers Explorers Background

The Rogers Explorers program began in 2006 as a way to prepare eighth graders to transition into high school and subsequently introduce the students to opportunities within higher education. Since that time, the program involves 30 students at three different college and university campuses in Kentucky, for a total of 90 students each summer. The program is developed, coordinated, and supervised by the CRD in partnership with Eastern Kentucky University, Lindsey Wilson College and the University of the Cumberlands.

Students from the CRD's service area may apply to the program during their eighth grade year. After a competitive process, those selected will attend the program at one of the three institutions during the summer before their ninth grade year. Rogers Explorers participate in hands-on college courses, learn leadership skills and develop a network of friends and resources throughout the Southern and Eastern Kentucky region. The program includes an intensive three-day, two-night schedule focusing on the development of skills in: critical and creative thinking, leadership, technology, entrepreneurship, and community service. Other activities occur during the Rogers Explorers program to highlight these specific areas, such as a local community service project, leadership experiences on an alpine challenge course, and lectures on leadership skills for young students (CRD Rogers Explorers, 2011). This reflection specifically focuses on two professors' experiences in working with the Rogers Explorers program participants to introduce college life and college opportunities.

Appalachian Student Opportunities

The Rogers Explorers program introduces many students (and parents) from the Appalachian region to a higher education learning environment for the first time. The primary objective of the program is to develop and conduct an awareness level higher education experience that will allow young students to live and learn on a college campus by experiencing the college environment firsthand. Early exposure to higher education plants a seed of awareness of the opportunities that exist for these students and gets them thinking about higher education and setting goals for their higher education plans as early as middle school. One example of research in this area is from the Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education (OACHE) who has sought to determine the barriers that keep Appalachian students from attending post-secondary institutions since the early 1990s.

The project, entitled "Appalachian Access and Success – Appalachian Ohio" notes that while many high school seniors from the Appalachian region report a desire to attend college, many fail to do so. Researchers have found that low self-esteem, poverty and a lack of information were among the strongest barriers to college participation. The limited participation in post-secondary education is especially disheartening since many of the barriers are only perceptions that would diminish with adequate information and preparation. Additionally, the researchers found that participating in a program in high

school, which helps students prepare for college, increased the likelihood that students would attend college right after graduation (OACHE, 2009).

By diminishing the perceptions of barriers to attending college, the Rogers Explorers program anticipates that an outcome of the program will be the subsequent prevention of outmigration from the areas in which the students were raised. The majority of counties, 34 of 42, in the service region at which this program is targeted are on the Appalachian Regional Commission's Distressed County list (ARC, 2012). For many years, students in these areas have been required to move away from their communities to find educational and work opportunities. Through programs such as Rogers Explorers, it is anticipated that new opportunities can be developed by introducing our nation's future leaders to knowledge, experiences, and skills that they can bring back to their Appalachian communities and ultimately prosper. The exposure to universities such as ECU will help students from the Appalachian Regional Commission's Distressed County list (ARC, 2012). For many years, students in these areas have been required to move away from their communities to find educational and work opportunities. Through programs such as Rogers Explorers, it is anticipated that new opportunities can be developed by introducing our nation's future leaders to knowledge, experiences, and skills that they can bring back to their Appalachian communities and ultimately prosper. The exposure to universities such as ECU will help students from Appalachia realize that higher education is accessible, attainable and relatively local, enabling them to seek education and employment in their regional area.

While data have not been collected regarding the college enrollment rates of Rogers Explorers graduates, anecdotally, the CRD states that students who complete the program typically go on to complete other youth programs sponsored by the CRD that provide college scholarships. Recent graduates of the program have remarked that the interactions with university faculty and staff have helped them learn to "think outside the box" when selecting a possible program of study in higher education. Another positive indicator for the program is that enrollment applications are rapidly increasing, stating that the word of mouth advertising from former participants speaks positively about the program.

Additional anecdotal evidence includes the comments of several program graduates who have reflected about the influence of the program on their lives in post program questionnaires. For example, one graduate stated:

Before Rogers Explorers, the idea of being in a college classroom was intimidating. Although the stereotypical professor is dull and unapproachable, I found the professors at this program to be very interactive and eager to help us learn and succeed. Rogers Explorers made me overcome my fear of going away to college. I now look forward to a great college experience (2011).

Further, with regards to the college experience, one graduate noted the following:

One unique thing about Rogers Explorers was that you got to live the college life. I was able to stay in a college dorm, eat a college lunch, even sit in a college classroom and receive a lecture. This program really helped me get an idea for college life and got me excited to attend college (2011).

Additionally, another graduate's comments may best describe the interpersonal benefits of the program.

As a current senior in high school, I look back at Rogers Explorers and see it as possibly the

most beneficial enrichment program I have ever been to. Since then, I have been to several others. However, this was the initial program that taught me to step out of my comfort zone. Before Rogers Explorers, I had always had a group of friends I knew my entire life, and I was never really forced to meet new people. At the camp, I was with a myriad of people from all throughout southern and eastern Kentucky whom I did not know, so I had to branch out of the norm and I met many new friends. I still keep in touch with these people several years later and Rogers Explorers gave me the tools needed to learn how to easily meet new people once I get to college and beyond (2011).

While student feedback is essential in evaluating program success, it should be noted that academic institutions and their faculty can also further their regional stewardship mission by hosting these students from the Appalachian service region. The next sections will explore the perspectives of two of those university faculty members who provided instruction to the program, one in communication skills and one in homeland security.

Communication Skills: Faculty Perspective

The overall goal of the effective communication skills presentation was to give students the basic knowledge of what good communication is, and then teach them the skills needed for effective communication. A two-hour session presented during the Rogers Explorers program session at ECU gave students the opportunity to learn about effective communication skills via a traditional lecture format and then practice these skills through activities such as personal speeches, team speeches, and impromptu speaking. The students were taught how to eliminate some of the distracting mannerisms that could hinder their presentation skills, and they left the session with an understanding that good leaders must possess effective communication skills. Students were able to interview a classmate, and then present the classmate to the rest of the group, thus using their listening skills during the interview and their public speaking skills during the speech. The students were also asked a variety of impromptu questions, after being instructed how to give an impromptu speech. The session concluded with a discussion of effective listening skills, because not only should future leaders be equipped with public speaking skills, but the students learned that good leaders are also good listeners. Students were able to learn skills as rising high school students that some students do not learn or get the opportunities to develop until college, thus putting them on the "fast-track" to leadership and communication education and skill development. The lecture and activities that were used during the session were the exact same activities that this professor uses when instructing college-level students about effective public speaking and communication skills. Thus, even though the students in the audience were younger than traditional college-age students, they were nonetheless exposed to a classroom environment, activities, and lecture that exactly replicate a lesson that any ECU student in an introductory communication class would have the opportunity to experience. The Rogers Explorers get the opportunity to learn the material at an earlier age than a typical college student; however, the students are not the only ones who learned from this experience.

The professor who taught the session on communication skills learned not only the importance of teaching effective communication skills to younger populations such as the Rogers Explorers, but also the benefits of regional stewardship and outreach to a younger population. By completing the typical duties of a college professor and teaching a lesson

on communication skills to a younger audience, the faculty member was able to serve a typically underserved population of students and expose them to skills they will need in high school, college, and beyond. The experience was humbling for the professor, who now realizes the importance of exposing students to college opportunities at a young age. In short, participating as a professor in Rogers Explorers was a wonderful way to combine the field of communication with regional stewardship.

Homeland Security: Faculty Perspective

The overall goal of the regional engagement experience was to educate the new high school freshmen on various paths that may be taken with an education in homeland security. While a quality education could be obtained within a few hours from their homes, they were provided a "window to the world" of possibilities that awaits them. While opportunities may be available in their home state, economic conditions in many of the distressed counties necessitated the encouragement to students to consider all possibilities throughout the United States. With regards to curriculum, it is imperative to balance the dissemination of information with the ability for students to critically and creatively apply the subject matter. Whenever career field discussions change from the traditional college student, practitioner or faculty member to a younger audience, academicians may find themselves altering the terminology and pedagogical methods to ensure comprehension.

The two hour block was divided into two parts to fulfill learning objectives. First, a traditional lecture method was used to disseminate information to the students. This method was supplemented with videos, open-ended questions and short activities to maintain the student's interest. The second part of the course was used to solicit feedback and consequently test the student's comprehension of the information. The format of a popular television game show was implemented after dividing students into teams. This familiar format was enjoyed by the students and aided in their understanding of the homeland security system in the United States.

The Rogers Explorers experience of the homeland security professor instilled a great deal of hope in his outlook for the post-secondary students of tomorrow. While many of the students had not entered their P-12 education when the tragic events of September 11, 2001 occurred, they were able to quickly understand the cause and effect of the situation as it applied to the world's current events. Specifically, the students learned to assess past events for critical elements, analyze current events for subsequent improvements, and apply the lessons learned to their own rural communities. The professor found the students to be extremely insightful, quick learners and objective, indicating their ability to comprehend the course material that is used in the introduction of homeland security undergraduate course. This comprehension has led to a planned introduction of additional content for future Rogers Explorers sessions.

Program Replication

As described in the preceding sections, programs such as Rogers Explorers provide students from the Appalachian region with an opportunity to experience higher education during an immersive three day program. It should also be noted that many of these students may have otherwise never had an opportunity to interact with a university environment on

this scale. The last goal of this reflection piece is to challenge readers to contemplate the development or adoption of a similar program within their communities/universities.

Regional engagement opportunities, such as Rogers Explorers, build partnerships between community organizations which may lead to other collaborative opportunities. Due to the low income levels of many of the families with youth in the program, the program is free to accepted students with all costs being paid by the non-profit and institutions of higher education. Therefore, an organization must first obtain financial resources to fund the program, possibly through a grant, corporate sponsor or cost-sharing agreement. Next, the universities or non-profit organizations can work with local middle and high schools to identify deserving students to attend the program. These deserving students from distressed counties in Appalachia greatly benefit from the program as previously stated; however, non-Appalachian regions would also benefit from exposing students to higher education at an early age. In short, the replication of targeted outreach and development programs plant the seed within young people's minds that college is within their reach. Moreover, these programs expose young leaders to higher education, which could potentially lead to a more capable workforce for the future. The experiences of those involved with Rogers Explorers have been overwhelmingly positive and stakeholders believe that the efforts in regional engagement are making a difference in the life of current and future ECU students.

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