



# EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES IN NC'S RURAL, MOUNTAIN COMMUNITIES

**CASSIDY BELCHER** dreams of being a baker. She has grand plans to launch her own business, selling her baked goods to stores, restaurants, and farmers markets. In her mind's eye, she's already a culinary success story.

But Cassidy has a huge obstacle to overcome. She lives in a small community in the Appalachian Mountains—the same place her family has lived for generations. Nestled in Madison County, N.C., near the Tennessee border, Laurel is a township with poor job prospects and scarce educational resources. It doesn't have much to offer in support of her goals. *(continued on next page)*



Fortunately, Cassidy, a middle-schooler, participates in the Partnership for Appalachian Girl’s Education (PAGE) directed by Duke University adjunct research scholar Deborah Hicks. And, this summer, she’ll be part of the all-girl inaugural group involved with the Education and Rural Entrepreneurship in Appalachia (EREA). This pilot initiative, also led by Hicks, is designed to explore the educational needs, challenges, and opportunities in the state’s rural, mountain communities. It brings together Duke faculty, researchers, and students and the small-town educators and community members, fostering collaboration.

Their work, coupled with support from the University-wide Bass Connections initiative,

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*Top row (left to right):* Members of the Bass Connections EHD team meeting with administrative leaders from Madison County Schools; North Carolina Campus Compact VISTA, Elizabeth McIntosh, with Sandra Tolley, Chair of Madison County Schools Board of Education; Bass Connections EHD scholar, Hillary Grubbs, in planning meeting held at Duke with community partners from Madison County Public Schools.

*Middle row (left to right):* Bass Connections EHD Scholars, Abby Ardis and Mary Wilson, in planning meeting with community partners from Madison County Public Schools; Bass Connections EHD Scholars on hike to Max Patch Bald in Madison County, North Carolina; Bass Connections EHD Scholar, Patricia Deza, working on site in Hot Springs, North Carolina.

*Bottom row (left to right):* Bass Connections EHD team leader, Deborah Hicks, leading meeting on site in Hot Springs, North Carolina; Photograph by Cassidy Belcher, 8th grader at Madison Middle School and participant in PAGE: Partnership for Appalachian Girls’ Education; Bass Connections EHD scholars working with Will Hoffman and Caroline Davis of Madison County Public Schools, in Hot Springs.

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—DEBORAH HICKS

will introduce school-age students in this part of Appalachia, including Spring Creek and Hot Springs, to the knowledge and resources they will need to pursue their chosen careers.

“Our goal is to help young people acquire the skills to be entrepreneurial, such as creating a business plan or designing a marketing strategy,” said Hicks, whose research focus is education. “Even if they decide they don’t want to be entrepreneurs, they’ll still have the 21st-Century skills to translate their knowledge into other opportunities.”

Bass Connections is the perfect partner to support such efforts, she said. The \$50-million initiative, launched by Anne and Robert Bass, pairs undergraduate students with faculty mentors and gives them a chance to make palpable impacts in communities throughout the world, as well as closer to home.

It’s here that EREA will come in. These small, rural villages face a multitude of economic and social challenges. But there’s one underlying problem that contributes to nearly all the struggles—the lack of educational resources and opportunity.

According to Hicks, the decrease in educational funding from the N.C. legislature has crippled opportunities for these students. In recent years, the local Head Start—the

free pre-school program available to low-income families—shut its doors. Many of the smaller schools that traditionally served older children have also closed. As a result, students can spend up to two hours one way to attend school, effectively prohibiting them from joining in any after-school enrichment activities.

These problems have parents worried, Hicks said. Little education and even fewer job prospects are creating a brain drain in these communities. Youths who leave home for college frequently don’t return because they find more enticing employment elsewhere. The EREA team considered these concerns when mapping out the program’s structure. Consequently, participants will acquire skills needed to create job opportunities and be successful in their native communities.

“It was clear there is a need for alternative ways of supporting adolescent kids in middle school and the need for mentoring kids so they don’t go the path of dropping out of school,” Hicks said. “That’s why we decided to pilot and develop a rural entrepreneurship program for middle school youth.”

The pilot year will focus on 8th- and 9th-grade girls, she said. After evaluating its success, the team hopes to offer it to both middle-school and high-school aged boys and girls in the future.



And, the most effective way to engage these students is to introduce them to the undergraduates who are also part of EREA. In fact, the Duke students chose the entrepreneurial concept and are co-designing every part of the project. It's also helpful, Hicks said, to introduce role models who are closer to the participants' ages and who also come from small, rural places.


For example, it was the intimate knowledge of village life that prompted Emily Hadley, a junior public policy and social sciences major, to jump at the opportunity to work with Madison County's youth. Growing up in a small town with many dirt roads, Hadley understands the isolation that accompanies living in remote locations, and she's excited to show these young people how to turn their imaginations and dreams into profitable ventures.

"We're building relationships with these students. We spend time with them. It's not just interviewing them and researching. We're finding out about their lives," said Hadley, who is a native of rural New Hampshire. "It's also been really cool to build the interaction with the community leaders—especially with the school board."

In addition, according to Hicks, the Duke students will conduct independent research projects that will support EREA's overall goals of supporting local communities and school systems. Each project, which must receive approval from Duke's Institutional Review Board, will include plans for a focus group with parents and school officials or a pre- and post-test of what participants learned during the summer program.

But, Hicks and her undergraduate research assistants do not—and will

not—have the resources to maintain a daily presence in the Appalachian communities. Ultimately, the responsibility for maintaining and administering the EREA program will fall to Madison County's school officials.

"We're building capacity so our school partners in Madison County can take over. We can't be out there day-to-day, so hopefully, we're creating something that is sustainable for them," Hicks said. "We hope, beyond next year, that we'll be able to tackle the connection between job loss and the economy and the schools themselves. We want to see if there isn't some way to work with the school system, creating a partnership that could lead to a rebirth or at least make the situation better." 



As a student scholar on the Bass Connections: Education, Poverty, and Economic Development in Rural Appalachia team, I have enjoyed the incredible opportunities to work with community leaders, college professors, fellow Duke students, and Appalachian middle school girls to affect change in Madison County, NC. Together, we have identified a community need for increased awareness of homegrown entrepreneurship and are taking steps to address this issue by developing a three-week summer entrepreneurship program for Madison eighth and ninth grade girls. I love applying my academic studies beyond the classroom and building my problem-solving and teamwork skills. I have only just begun to appreciate the power of research, collaboration, and passion in driving social change and look forward to the many exciting developments on the horizon!

—EMILY HADLEY, TRINITY CLASS OF 2015, BASS SCHOLAR