

Project Profile

Surfacing the Needs of Paraeducators Enrolled in Rural Teacher Preparation Programs

Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success



Surfacing the Needs of Paraeducators Enrolled in Rural Teacher Preparation Programs

Organization

Western Illinois University | Macomb, IL

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Geographic Focus

West Central Illinois

Population Focus

This project focuses on rolling cohorts of underserved, rural low-income paraeducators enrolled in Paraeducator Teacher Education Option (PTEO) programs among rural, West Central Illinois.

Project Overview

This project focuses on a PTEO programs at Western Illinois University (WIU) and allows for an in-depth examination of a unique alternative pathway to postsecondary education and access to the teaching workforce serving rural, low-income, and diverse learners.

Through this project, we seek to understand the unique challenges and learning needs of paraeducators in a rural teacher preparation program. This research provides a space for reimagining public postsecondary education institutions as central sites for untapping the talents of low-income and diverse communities toward higher mobility and economic growth in rural regions. The results allow us to inform policy and practices in rural teacher education programs while challenging the persistent urban-normativity focus¹ of college recruitment and retention policies, practices, and structures that marginalize underserved, rural low-income populations at four-year universities.

– *Western Illinois University*

Research Questions

1. To what extent does the WIU non-traditional teacher education pathway to postsecondary education reduce systemic barriers for rural, low-income paraeducators that also include persons of color and multilingual individuals with immigrant/refugee backgrounds?
2. How does a four-year university serving a rural region successfully create and sustain flexible pathways toward postsecondary degree completion and professional credentialing, leading to incremental career elevation and expanded employment opportunities for traditionally low-income and underrepresented rural populations?
3. What types of experiences, programs, and support integrated in the nontraditional/alternative pathways positively affect low-income and diverse rural learners' program persistence and completion rates — and ultimately, improved job placement?

Research Methodology

WIU will use a mixed-methods research design to explore sociocultural theories that suggest local education policies are derived from complex cultural products negotiated among participants and stakeholders in educational settings and informed by local, state, and federal policies. WIU's methodology will capture the multilayered reality of educational context within West Central Illinois through pre- and post-surveys, job placement surveys, field observation of students and program coordinators, review of university and state policy documents, and semi-structured interviews of various participants.

Participants in this project include rolling cohorts of rural, low-income paraeducators enrolled in PTEO from among three areas: early childhood education, elementary education, and special education. Other participants include program coordinators, program advisors, student mentors, course professors/instructors, and university administrators.

Research Significance

A large swath of stakeholders across Illinois institutions of postsecondary education will find this action-oriented research project useful, including WIU, the Illinois State Board of Education, and state institutions of postsecondary education offering teacher preparation programs — especially those in rural regions of the state with changing demographics. In addition, rural school districts that employ paraeducators who could benefit from pursuing postsecondary education, the Latino Policy Forum, and professional education organizations such as the Illinois Association for Multilingual Multicultural Education and other such associations, will find added benefits from this project.

The public and key stakeholders will learn more about the project through reports, presentations, and peer-reviewed articles, supplemented with short videos created for wider dissemination.

Grant Period of Performance

March 2023 to February 2026