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NORTHARK GAINS MOMENTUM WITH ATE GRANTS

"We have great faculty and we have a commitment to really helping grow our community and our state and our region. So we started in 2017 with our very first New to ATE grant to try to establish remote delivery of our IT [information technology] program because it's hard to get to our campus on little, windy Arkansas roads," Dr. Laura Berry said during CCPI-STEM Thought Leaders Dialogue on Small and Rural Colleges on February 9.

Berry, interim dean of Health Professions, and Director of Institutional Partnerships & Special Initiatives at North Arkansas College (Northark) led the team that received Mentor-Connect mentoring in 2016 to develop a proposal for an Advanced Technological Education (ATE) grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF).

Berry said that first ATE grant award led to "a slew of other grant opportunities," including six more NSF grant awards for projects in data analytics, advanced manufacturing, environmental science, as well as scholarships. Those initiatives then led to funding from other sources.

Located in Harrison, Arkansas, a town with 13,000 residents, Northark's fall 2023 head count was fewer than 2,000 students.

"From the community college perspective in our rural area, we're looking for opportunities to not just respond to community needs, but also make sure we've done our homework so we can show the community what is out there just over the horizon that they need to be looking for. We are the ones who can make those connections," Berry said.

She credits the guidance that Northark team members received from Ann Beheler, their Mentor-Connect mentor in 2016, with invigorating and expanding the college's partnerships with employers. "We have changed our advisory committee model and we use something we call a business industry leadership team, which really allows us to get really, really good feedback from our area employers. And that has led to some of the grant opportunities that we're using," she said.

For the college's newest ATE project, Increasing Accessibility to Advanced Manufacturing Programs Using Competency-Based Education, employers are "hands-on" with faculty in developing the curriculum modules. "We're doing that because we need them to tell us how to measure competency apprenticeships," Berry said.

Since 2016 each grant-funded project has "opened the door to bring a number of emerging technologies" and attracted positive attention and new funding to the college. "So one grant is great, but what happened is it is just like the big rock building up momentum," she said.

The Thought Leaders' Dialogue II report will be posted on CCPI-STEM's website this spring.

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