

# Friends of EDL Newsletter

## Winter 2024 Issue

### Welcome!

Welcome to the first-ever Department of Educational Leadership newsletter! We're launching this biannual newsletter to cultivate our connections with YOU – our current and former students, faculty, community partners, and friends. We hope to share relevant news, resources, and spotlight some of the amazing people and projects in our department. Each newsletter will feature a student or alumni spotlight, a faculty spotlight, a call to action, and various short articles written by faculty and students. In this Winter 2024 Issue, you'll find:

- Rural Educational Leaders, by Dr. Melissa Sadorf
- Re-imagining Equitable Futures in Education for Arizona College Students, by Dez Yarbrough and Dr. Cynthia Villarreal
- Alumni Spotlight on Dr. Kimberly Guerin
- Faculty Spotlight on Dr. Annie Watson
- Commencement Highlights
- Call to Action: Follow us on Social Media

We hope you enjoy this inaugural Friends of EDL Newsletter, and we also hope you'll share it with your colleagues and community. Please reach out to the EDL Chair directly with any feedback or other ideas for connecting with us: Dr. Angelina Castagno, [angelina.castagno@nau.edu](mailto:angelina.castagno@nau.edu)

### Rural Educational Leaders

By: **Melissa Sadorf**

When I became superintendent in a rural district, I thought I knew rural leadership. I had grown up and taught in rural communities, but I soon discovered that leading in this space was vastly different. Every rural place is unique, with complexities and strengths that go beyond what outsiders often perceive. This realization sparked my journey to understand the depth and diversity of rural education and the unique challenges and rewards that come with it.

Many still see rural education as a steppingstone—a temporary stop before moving to a more "prestigious" urban district. This misconception doesn't reflect the reality. Rural leadership is not lesser or simpler; it's a career filled with purpose, innovation, and a strong sense of community. The term "rural" is too often oversimplified to mean any non-urban area. In reality, rural communities are incredibly diverse, from the high deserts of Southern Arizona to the forests of Flagstaff, each with distinct cultures, landscapes, and needs. This diversity in "rural" means that effective leadership here demands an understanding of each community's specific context and culture.



One of the greatest revelations in my career was recognizing that rural communities are not homogenous. They encompass a broad array of people and environments, from farming and ranching families to remote, culturally distinct Indigenous communities. These communities bring their own unique strengths, whether through agricultural expertise, deep-rooted cultural practices, or a close connection to the land. In my former district, a strong cultural identity bonded the community, forming a foundation for school programs that resonated with students and families. Yet, these strengths don't negate the challenges, like teacher shortages and limited funding, which rural schools tackle with creativity and resourcefulness every day.

In rural areas, schools are more than educational institutions. They are the community's heartbeat—a place for gatherings, sports, and cultural events. As they are typically the largest local employer and are always a social anchor, schools hold the community together. However, this interconnectedness can create challenges, as

everyone's personal and professional lives overlap. Balancing these dynamics to make the best decisions for students and the community requires careful, respectful navigation.

Rural educators are masters of creativity out of necessity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, we faced severe limitations in technology access. Many students lacked internet at home, and resources were scarce. So communities took charge, creating Wi-Fi hotspots and setting up Wi-Fi-enabled buses for remote learning. This resourcefulness and resilience are at the core of rural education and have always been there, with rural leaders finding ways to overcome challenges by working together and building partnerships.

For too long, rural education has been viewed from an urban lens. It is essential to share the stories that define rural schools—their struggles, innovations, and successes. Storytelling helps policymakers and others understand rural realities and see that rural education is not just an afterthought but a crucial, thriving part of our nation's educational fabric.

At its heart, rural education is vital. Rural schools serve millions and are essential to the survival and resilience of their communities. As rural leaders, we must advocate for these schools, ensuring they get the resources and recognition they deserve. Embracing and amplifying the unique strengths of rural education ensures that rural communities and schools will continue to thrive. Rural education is not a lesser path; it is a dynamic, essential pillar of our educational landscape.

For those looking to dive deeper into rural education and leadership, my book [The Resilient Rural Leader: Rising to the Challenges of Rural Education](#) provides insights and lessons from years of experience in this field. Additional resources are available through organizations like the National Rural Education Association ([NREA](#)), the Arizona Rural Schools Association ([ARSA](#)), and the NAU Rural Resource Center ([NAURRC](#)). These resources are excellent places to connect with others, find guidance, and explore solutions tailored to rural schools and communities. By building on our shared strengths and knowledge, we can ensure rural education remains a vibrant, essential part of our nation's educational landscape.

## Re-imagining Equitable Futures in Education for AZ College Students By: Dez Yarbrough & Cynthia D. Villarreal

As a friend of NAU's [Educational Leadership](#) (EDL) department, you may have come across recent NAU communication regarding our designation as a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI). In this blog post written by EDL Master's student, Dezaree Yarbrough, and Assistant Professor, [Dr. Cynthia Villarreal](#), we highlight some key takeaways about NAU's HSI status, what this means for the community, and how it impacts other strategic initiatives on campus and in the state. Before we dig in, it is important to emphasize that being an HSI does not mean NAU is disinvested in the success of students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Quite the contrary.



### So, what does it mean to be an HSI?

Actually, researchers have been grappling with [this very question](#) for years. Put simply, the Hispanic-serving institution designation is a [federal designation](#) that states 25% of full time undergraduate students enrolled identify as Hispanic/Latine. NAU reached that enrollment threshold in [Spring 2021](#) and NAU-Yuma received the HSI designation in 2007. But enrolling Hispanic/Latine students is only one part of the equation of being an HSI. The other aspect of being an HSI is being committed to providing services and resources to support the success of Hispanic/Latine students. And while some might think that serving Hispanic/Latine students directly excludes students from other identities, altering practices at HSIs to be more culturally responsive benefits ALL students regardless of race and ethnicity. HSIs contribute to greater [upward mobility](#) for Hispanic/Latine students as well as other racially minoritized students. HSIs can also provide more supportive models of [academic advising](#), [mentoring](#), and teaching because of a deepened commitment to supporting minoritized students. In the context of education, [Minority-serving institutions](#) in general have been shown to prepare a more [diverse and culturally competent](#) teacher workforce. And being an HSI opens up eligibility to many funding opportunities that may elevate the research and programming at an institution.

### What's next for NAU and Arizona?

In the state of Arizona, there are currently [20 HSIs](#) and [6 emerging HSIs](#). Arizona also happens to be a Hispanic-Serving State with [30% of all undergraduate students](#) enrolled in Arizona higher education identifying as Hispanic/Latine. Being a state that serves 45% of Hispanic/Latine students in K-12 schools, this comes as no surprise. However, we must recognize that enrolling in college is again only one part of the higher education equation. [Arizona HSIs](#) have begun working collaboratively to increase knowledge sharing across institutions and create greater pathways, outcomes, and successes for Hispanic/Latine students in the Grand Canyon State.

At NAU, President José Luis Cruz Rivera has prioritized initiatives on campus such as [NAU en Español](#), and hiring [more diverse faculty](#). In addition to NAU's [strategic priority](#) of Student Success—which includes broadening access and closing gaps in retention/completion—NAU's AU's [Strategic Roadmap](#) also details a commitment to Indigenous Peoples. As of Fall 2023, NAU provides [free tuition](#) for all members of Arizona's 22 federally recognized tribes. While NAU is currently an HSI, it is also on its way to becoming federally recognized as a [Native American Serving Non-Tribal Institution \(NASNTI\)](#). Recognition of this dual HSI/NASNTI designation would make it the first in the state. Beyond broadening access to higher education for all Arizonans, these commitments to serving are re-imagining equitable futures in education for Arizona college students. To bring some of this to life, EDL's Department Chair, [Dr. Angelina Castagno](#), along with Chair of the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, [Dr. Luis Fernandez](#), are Co-Principal Investigators for a \$3 Million [HSI grant](#). Stay tuned to the Friends of EDL Newsletter for future updates on this initiative.

### What's next for NAU's College of Education?

During the 2023-2024 academic year, [Dean Ramona Mellott and Dr. Claudia Rodas](#) convened a College of Education (COE) HSI Task Force. The goal of the task force was to learn alongside NAU Hispanic/Latine students and devise a strategy for how to better serve them in the COE. The task force conducted listening sessions with students at NAU Mountain Campus, NAU-Yuma, and with our NAU online community. The task force is now forming subcommittees to take on the next phase of this work including building an undergraduate research mentorship program funded by the AZ [HSI Consortium G.A.T.E. Funding](#) and working to strengthen community partnerships with Latine organizations in Arizona.

### What are important considerations for leaders in education?

*For K-12 leaders*, as they prepare Hispanic/Latine students for success in college and careers, culturally appropriate curriculum is among the top priorities. This means bringing Hispanic/Latine communities' histories, voices, and contributions into lesson plans and curricula. Professional development opportunities emphasizing culturally responsive pedagogy are essential to equip teachers with the tools to create inclusive and affirming learning environments. Trainings focused on culturally responsive learning are needed to give educators the resources to create inclusive and affirming learning spaces. Educators can learn to teach in culturally appropriate ways, center family and community, and design inclusive classrooms. Leaders can identify inequities and tailor specific solutions by collecting and mining demographic information, academic results, engagement metrics, and family surveys. Local partnerships can also help develop resources and support networks geared toward Hispanic students and families, creating an inclusive and fair school environment.

*For those working in higher education*, having strong community support is essential for HSIs' success. Students can benefit academically and socially from this support system by building relationships with local businesses, organizations, and families. These relationships can be used to establish mentorship programs, internships, and college preparation courses targeted explicitly at Hispanic/Latine students.

*Across all educational levels*, promoting mental health and well-being is a shared consideration for educational leaders. Recognizing that many Hispanic and Latine students may face systemic barriers, trauma, and mental health challenges, educational leaders should prioritize the availability of mental health resources and support systems. Implementing wellness programs, counseling services, and awareness campaigns can help create a supportive

environment that addresses the holistic needs of Hispanic students and contributes positively to their academic success.

Arizona has several community outreach programs to broaden access and increase the success of Hispanic/Latine students. Some notable initiatives include:

- **Arizona GEAR UP:** This program supports low-income students who are ready for post-secondary education. It offers mentoring, tutoring, and college readiness classes in high-Hispanic schools to help students and their families navigate the educational system.
- **Los Hacheros Hispanic Alumni Scholarship:** Scholarships are awarded to Hispanic students attending NAU for post-secondary studies. The **Chicanos por la Causa (CPLC) Scholarship Program** offers multiple scholarships for Latine students focused on academic performance and civic engagement.
- **Communities in Schools Arizona:** This initiative is a collaborative school-community approach for better education. Through academic counseling, peer mentoring, and health and wellness programs, it serves children in underserved neighborhoods (primarily Hispanic/Latine) so they have the proper support to excel at school.
- **The Arizona-Mexico Commission's Education Working Group:** This program promotes collaboration between Arizona and Mexico to improve educational access and quality. It focuses on building partnerships between academic institutions, local governments, and community organizations to create a supportive network for Hispanic students.
- **AVANCE Arizona:** AVANCE offers a two-generation approach to education, focusing on families of young children, particularly in Hispanic communities. The program provides educational workshops for parents and children, promoting early literacy and lifelong learning.

As a department, EDL is deeply committed to serving students well, and we welcome your insights and collaborative ideas about how we can continue to leverage our responsibilities as an HSI in Arizona.

### Alumni Spotlight: Dr. Kimberly Guerin

By: Steve Jeras

Dr. Kimberly Guerin is in her third year as the Superintendent of Madison Elementary School District, bringing a deep commitment to education shaped by her own journey through Northern Arizona University's (NAU) leadership programs. She earned her Master's in Educational Leadership in 1998 and completed her Doctorate in 2013.

Reflecting on her time in the doctoral program, Dr. Guerin fondly remembers the strong bonds formed with her cohort, sharing that they supported each other through the challenges.

"The work is really challenging; there are some ups and downs, and you end up leaning on each other for areas that are not your strength," she says. "You build these strong relationships with other leaders, and you get as much from them as you do from the program."



She also recognizes the professors who were genuinely invested in her success. "Dr. Wigall was pushing me and wanted me to succeed and was going to remove barriers for me," she says. "I've heard of other programs where you have to jump through hoops...and you have to fight for yourself to try to get through. I didn't feel that way. I felt he was invested in my success and wanted to see me get through, and I thought that was unique."

One of her biggest takeaways from the Educational Leadership program is that effective leadership is rarely black and white. "It's complicated work," Dr. Guerin notes, emphasizing the need to consider diverse perspectives, organizational traditions, and hidden dynamics. "You have to authentically listen to the people around you to move the organization forward."



While the program was rigorous, Dr. Guerin said the hard work was worth it. “You have to know going in that it requires some balance and sacrifice, but I can say that it was the most rewarding and fulfilling experience of my professional career.”

Dr. Guerin’s journey and experiences are a testament to her resilience and dedication to educational leadership—qualities she brings to her role at Madison Elementary School District today.

### Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Annie Watson

Annie Watson (Ph.D.) is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership. She currently teaches EDF-200 (Introduction to Education) for large classes of undergraduate education majors at NAU, as well as occasional sections of EDF-301W (School & Society) for pre-service Elementary Education majors.



Dr. Watson grew up in Flagstaff, and she ran her way through high school and college as a cross country and track athlete at Mississippi State University. After returning home, she earned her master’s degree in English and Secondary Education from NAU in 2010. She taught 9th and 10th grade English at Winslow High School (2010-2013) and Flagstaff High School (2013-2019) before accepting her current position at NAU. In December 2023, Annie completed her doctoral degree in Curriculum & Instruction with a dissertation titled [“Family Poverty and the Passive Curriculum of Care: Stories from Unhoused Families and Insights from K-12 Educators.”](#) This was a qualitative study using a critical ethnographic

methodology; the data sources were primarily interviews and observations. Dr. Watson’s other research interests currently include teacher thinking, teacher identity, school culture, classroom culture, marginalized perspectives in education, transformative pedagogy, humanizing pedagogy, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Dr. Watson was featured in [the NAU Review](#) in December 2023, and she was selected by her colleagues as the [Teacher of the Year for the College of Education](#) in April 2024. With her new doctoral degree, Dr. Watson is eligible to serve on dissertation committees and welcomes anyone with a shared interest, methodology, or theoretical framework to [set up a meeting](#) with her.

Dr. Watson has also published two children’s picture books: *Is 2 A Lot?* (2019) and *My Monster Moofy* (2021). While living her best professor-writer-mom life, she also enjoys reading, travel, and all kinds of sports and exercise. Dr. Watson’s husband, Lawrence, is also a two-time NAU alumni, and he works as an assistant principal at Mount Elden Middle School. Their children, Joey and Benjamin, attend local public schools where they participate in sports and music programs.

### Commencement Highlights

The Department of Educational Leadership honored many graduates during the Fall 2024 graduation on Friday, December 13. Among our graduates were two new Doctors: Dr. Joshua Hamilton (mentored by Dr. Gerald Wood) and Dr. Andrea Bevier (mentored by Dr. Blue Brazelton). Our American Indian School Leadership program – led by Dr. Joseph Martin – also celebrated the graduation of 20 individuals who will all serve Arizona’s Native-serving schools as newly-minted principals. Congratulations to all of our EDL graduates, their families, and their mentors!



**Call to Action: [Follow EDL on Facebook!](#) @NAU Ed Leadership**