



GEAR UP TECH

Federal Grant Supports College Readiness in Rural Tennessee

Tennessee Tech University's **College of Education** has been awarded a record-setting grant of nearly **\$10 million** from the U.S. Department of Education to support college readiness efforts in some of the state's most rural and underserved communities.

The **Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)** grant is the second largest grant in the university's 109-year history and its largest grant aimed at directly serving populations in Tennessee.

Project leaders **Darek Potter**, director of the Millard Oakley STEM Center and assistant professor of exercise science; **Julie C. Baker**, interim associate provost and dean of the College of Graduate Studies; and, **Luke Anderson**, instructor of curriculum and instruction, say the grant is a way for Tech to "pay it forward" by expanding pathways to higher education for K-12 students in nearby rural communities.



The program will serve **Clay, Overton, Scott (Oneida Special School District), and Warren counties**. The Appalachian

Regional Commission categorizes Clay and Scott as "distressed" counties, while Warren County is classified as "at-risk" and Overton County ranks as "transitional."

The **trio of Tech faculty members – all former K-12 classroom teachers** – emphasizes that they have witnessed first-hand the difference that higher education can make in the life trajectory of students, their families, and communities. They also know the importance of early interventions, which is why they have **tailored Tech's GEAR UP program to begin reaching students in the sixth grade.**

"GEAR UP is specifically designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in post-secondary education," explained Potter. "We see the need, especially in the rural areas we work in, to **provide more supports for students and reduce obstacles to higher education. That's what this is all about.**"

"I came from a very rural background where college wasn't seen as an option for many of the students I grew up with," added Baker. "Now, we're in a position where we can help provide opportunities to increase college readiness for rural students. This is a way to do that – to say to rural students from those four counties, **'You can do this. You can go to college. There is a pathway for you.'**"

Learn more about the GEAR UP program at <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/gearup/index.html>.