

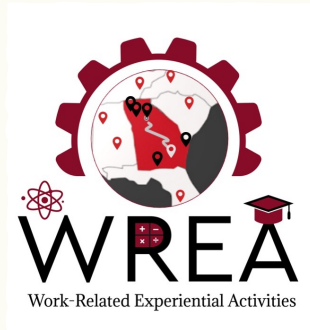
The Path from Education to Work: Findings from a Recent Study

Karen L. Webber, Ph.D.
The University of Georgia

NCAIR 2023 – 50th Annual Conference
Back Together Again



Louise McBee Institute
of Higher Education
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA



Experiential education is
an important part of
baccalaureate education

Work-related experiential
activities - WREAs

Today's session

- Briefly describe major facets of a recent study on students' access to WREAs
- Share some findings
- Engage in discussion on how similar kinds of projects can involve IR colleagues



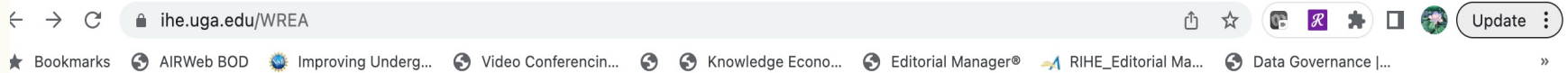
Louise McBee Institute
of Higher Education
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA



The WREA Project

- NSF-Funded multi-Institutional Grant to **examine the effect of students' access** to work-related experiential activities (WREAs)
- An important facet is **geographic location**
- Engineering and computer science students at six institutions in GA
- Mixed Methods design to examine perceptions and experiences from students, career center directors, employers, and company recruiters
 - Quantitative survey data from students in spring 2021 and spring 2022
 - Individual interview data from career center directors (2021) and sample of students (2022)
 - Focus group interviews with employers and company recruiters (2021 & 2022)
 - Observations of online career fairs (2021)
 - Lots of online discussions with career center directors and other advisory committee members throughout the project

https://www.ihe.uga.edu/WREA



Louise McBee Institute
of Higher Education
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

SUPPORT MCBEE IHE

Search

ABOUT

GRADUATE PROGRAMS

PEOPLE

RESEARCH

OUTREACH

NEWS & EVENTS

GIVING

FACULTY & STAFF OPENINGS

The Effect of Geographic Locale on Access to Work- Related Experiential Activities (WREAs)

MAIN MENU

- [WREA Reports](#)
- [WREA Conference Presentations](#)
- [WREA Timeline](#)
- [WREA Personnel](#)
- [WREA Press](#)

Briefly- Relevant Literature

- Growing desire to **affirm post-degree job acquisition**
- **WREA participation contributes to student success-** degree completion, employment, more employer network connections, and employment choices
- **Similar to the notion of 'education deserts'** (Hillman, 2016) in which students in rural locales have less access and benefits from postsecondary education, geographic place may affect students' access to WREAs (add to limited literature on geographic proximity)
- Because business locations based on infrastructure, incentives, and available labor typically concentrated in '**industrial clusters and networks in communities**' (Tate, 2008), students outside these clusters and networks may not have equal access to opportunities

Conceptual Framework and RQs

- Based on concepts of proximity research (Turley, 2006; 2009) and Weis et al.'s (2015) conceptualization of opportunity structures
- Because social and cultural context acts as a form of social currency in the labor market (Clarke, 2018) inequalities of opportunity may exist for WREA opportunities by geographic locale
- Main RQ: Does geographic locale affect STEM students' access to work-related experiential activities (WREAs)?

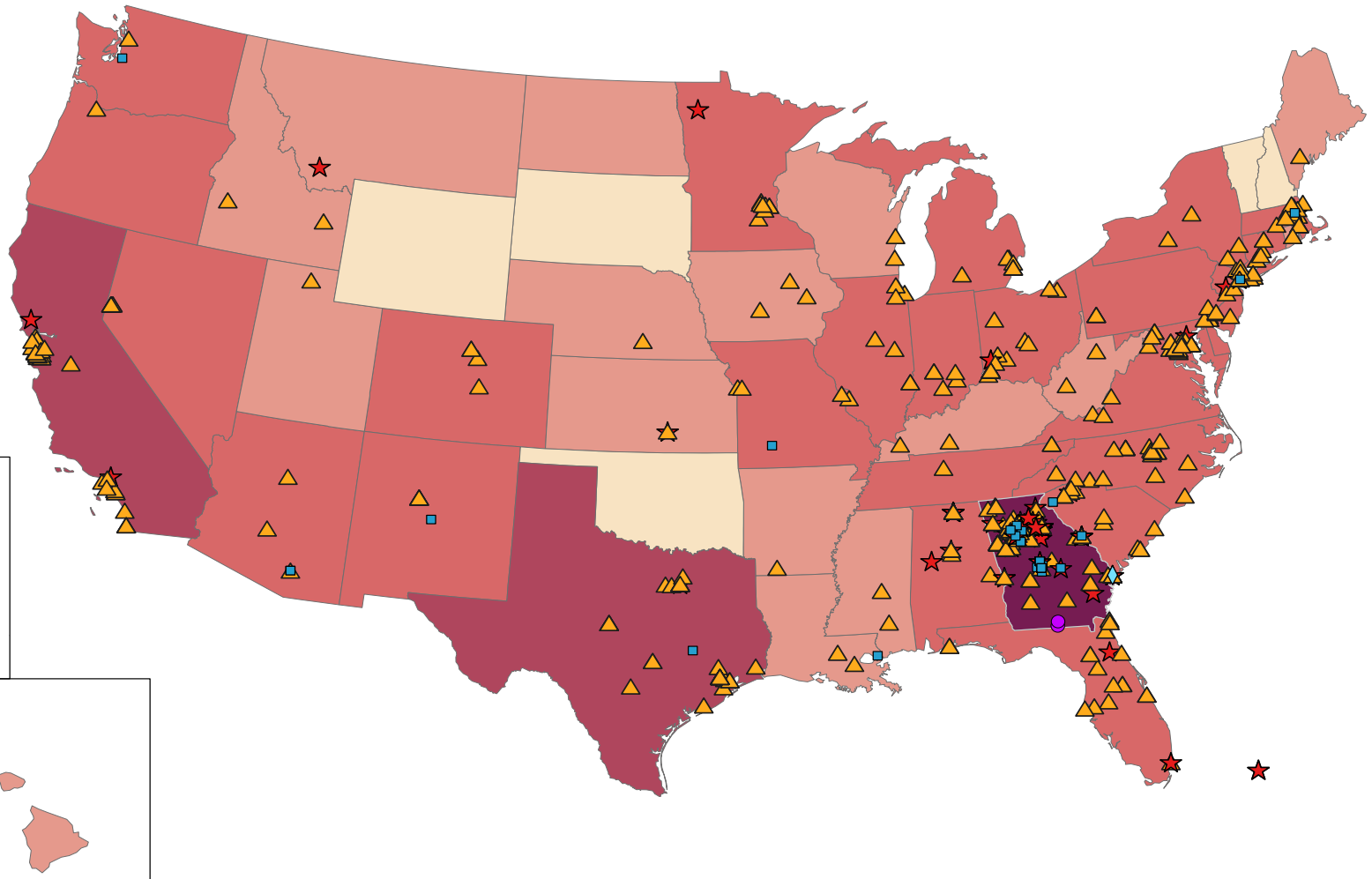
Mixed Method Research Plan

- Career and Employment Survey
 - Designed, piloted, then administered spring 2021 and 2022 at five universities in GA
 - Survey weighting, descriptive statistics, and quasi-experimental design (tied to literature)
 - Combined usable N= 2,300
- Interviews with:
 - Career Center Directors (N=6)
 - Employers (N=5 groups, 21 participants)
 - Students (N=70)

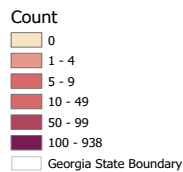
Overall Findings

- Students' perceived their WREA participation as helpful in preparing them for post-grad employment
- Students (and institutions) in more rural areas have lower access to WREA opportunities
- Students generally not keen on remote WREAs; Hybrid preferred to fully remote
- Students at certain institutions thought about, participated in WREAs earlier and more often. Culture and relative opportunity seem to be important

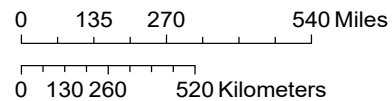
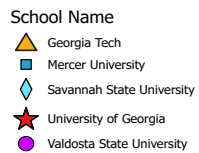
WREAs - USA



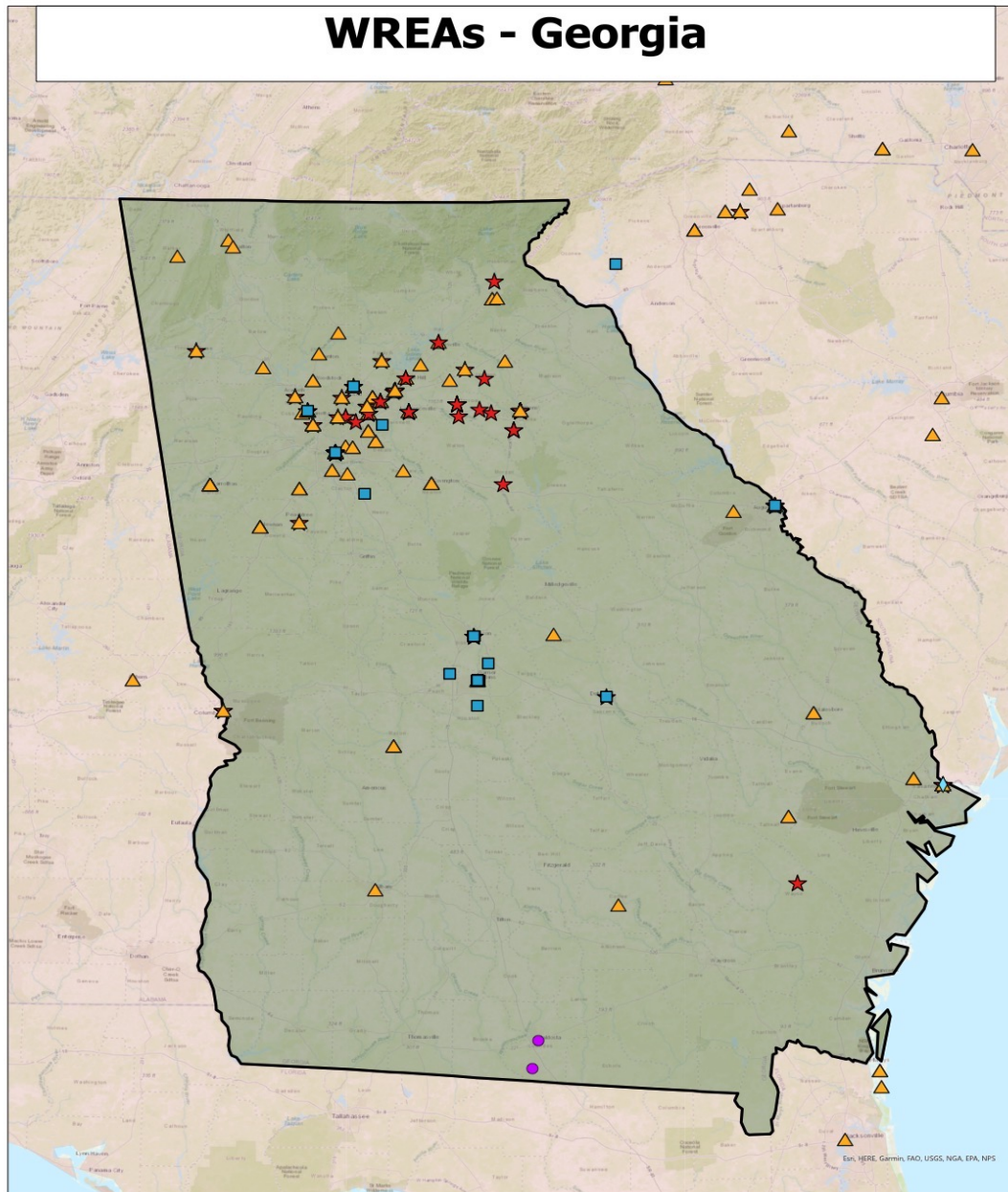
Sates with WREAs



Universities

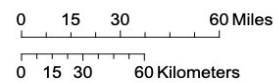


WREAs - Georgia



Universities

- School Name
- ▲ Georgia Tech
 - Mercer University
 - ◆ Savannah State University
 - ★ University of Georgia
 - Valdosta State University
 - ▭ Georgia State Boundary



Src: NERC, Garmin, FAO, USGS, NGA, EPA, NPS

Sp 2021 and 2022 Survey Findings

- 60% completed at least one WREA; 12% did 4+
- Respondents perceived positive gains from their WREAs
- Respondents preferred in-person over remote WREAs
- Some but generally few differences by gender, major, financial aid status
- See reports on WREA website and NACE paper on career competencies (<https://www.ihe.uga.edu/WREA>)

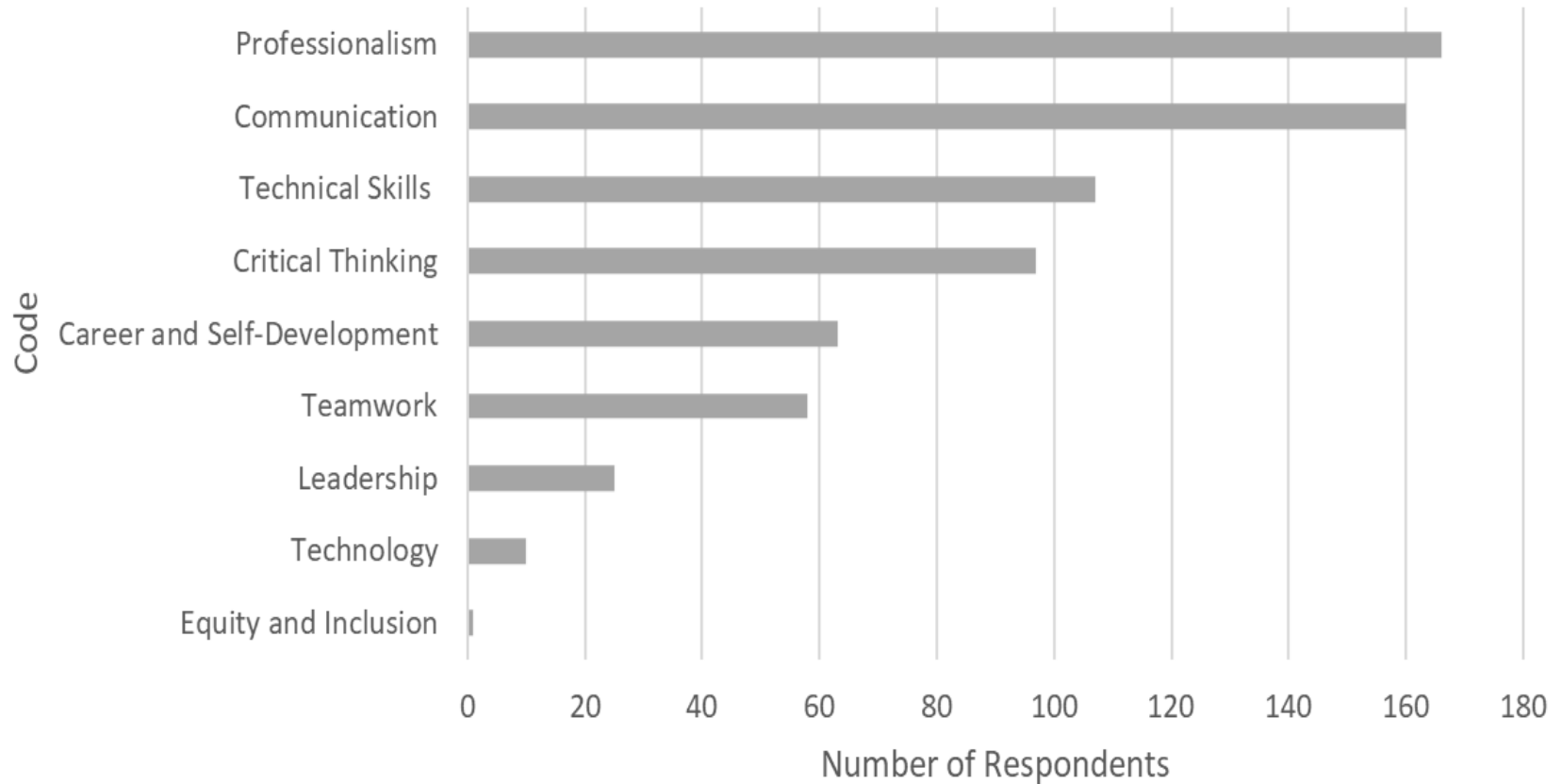
Career Competencies

	Mean	SD
In your WREA(s), how helpful were the following skills?^a		
Interacting with others in a professional setting	3.80	.513
Establishing relationships with employers	3.64	.669
Being guided by a mentor	3.57	.700
Understanding how to connect to the profession	3.55	.700
Improving critical thinking	3.53	.721
Learning how to find answers to questions quickly	3.52	.685
Understanding how to utilize digital technology to solve problems	3.50	.763
Learning how to manage time	3.46	.743
Understanding how to advance in my field	3.42	.802
Learning how to work with people of diverse backgrounds	3.28	.864
Developing skills as a leader	3.25	.862
Applying knowledge learned from class	3.10	.915
Learning how to write better	2.71	.981

*only includes students who responded that they had participated in at least one WREA (N= 1026)

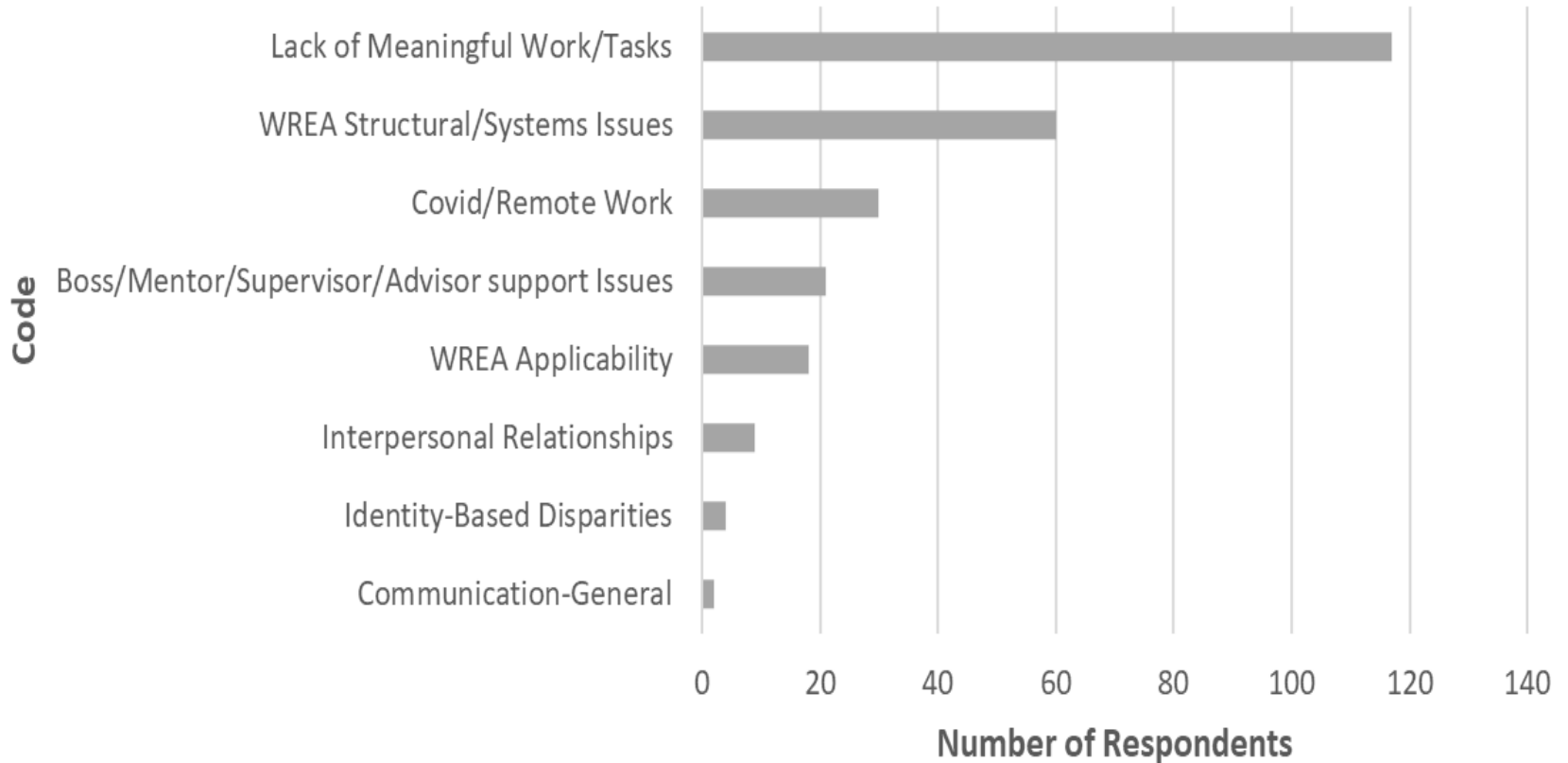
^a 1= not at all helpful, 4= very helpful

Responses for Survey question: “*What is the most helpful skill you developed during your WREA(s)?*” (N = 355 comments*) Spring 2022



* One respondent could have contributed more than one comment

Responses for Survey question: “*What is the least helpful experience you had during your WREA(s)?*” (N = 248 comments*) Spring 2022



* One respondent could have contributed more than one comment

Summary Findings- Career Directors (N=6)

- Atlanta is a significant industry and opportunity hub
- Non-metro institutions struggled with lower resources and fewer employers in their area
- COVID a big focus
 - forced increase in remote opportunities, some rescinded offer instead of going remote
 - overall, fewer employers at virtual career fairs, which meant fewer opportunities
 - Student participation was significantly down at certain institutions, but not the case at other institutions

Summary – Employers (5 focus groups, N=21)

- Many spoke of importance of **soft skills** and **‘passion’**
- **Importance of geography** and recruitment advantages
- A wide range of perceptions among employers & recruiters on **number of WREAs needed**
- **Remote** doesn't capture full experience for students as well as in-person, but remote gave more opportunities outside state
- **Remote opps not going away--** it models how the real world works with adjustments made

Summary – Students (N=70)

- clear advantages for students attending institutions in or within the closest **proximity to Atlanta** relative to the number and types of opportunities available to them
- Interviews revealed a perceived **stronger competitive environment** for students at one institution
- Students at non-metro institutions had substantially **fewer WREA** experiences;
- several mentioned they had to **take the initiative** to locate opportunities (e.g., one “**doing a lot of supplemental work**” to feel prepared for the job market
- Students at non-metro institutions spoke of advantages in being part of a **quiet, close-knit community**
- Overall, fewer students liked remote WREAs

Overall Summary

- Students perceived their WREA participation as **helpful in preparing** them for post-grad employment
- Geography played a significant role in access to WREA opportunities
- **Covid** changed our plans to a degree; weren't able to observe career fairs
- Low response rates didn't give us robust information on some questions like impact of WREA on job offers

Your Experiences with survey or interviews to help with campus colleagues



- Do you receive requests for survey or interview help?
- How do you decide which projects you work on/how prioritize your help?
- When you design quant or qual research, how do you incorporate literature and theory?



Good Practices For Survey Research in IR

- Understand the literature on survey research, consider relevant theory
- Be knowledgeable about the topic, research design, and analytic methods
- Consider Survey Format
 - Mode of delivery- internet access, accessible across phone & laptop
 - Wording - succinct length of survey, easily understood language
- Collaborate- work with different organizations/offices/etc. to allow access from multiple angles, know other open surveys
- Have a plan and then carry out accurate analysis and reporting

Relevant References

- Clarke, M. (2018). Rethinking graduate employability; The role of capital, individual attributes and context. *Studies in Higher Education, 43*(11), 1923-1937.
- Hillman, N. W. (2016). Geography of college opportunity: The case of education deserts. *American Educational Research Journal, 53*(4), 987-1021.
- Hora, M., Benbow, R., & Oleson. (2016). *Beyond the skills gap: Preparing college students for life and work*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Tate, A.F. (2008). Geography of opportunity: Poverty, place, and educational outcomes. *Educational Researcher, 37*(7), 397-411.
- Turley, R.N. L (2009). College proximity: Mapping access to opportunity. *Sociology of Education, 82*(2), 126-146.
- Weis, L., Eisenhart, M., Cipollone, K., Stich, A.E., Nikischer, A.B., Hanson, J., Leibbrandt, S.O., Allen, C.D., & Dominguez, R. (2015). In the guise of STEM education reform: Opportunity structures and outcomes in inclusive STEM-focused high schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 52*(6), 1024-1059.

Questions? Comments?

kwebber@uga.edu

Thanks to the WREA team members for their many contributions to this study

This project is supported by NSF Grant # 2000847. Findings, opinions, or recommendations expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF.



Louise McBee Institute
of Higher Education
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Thank you for attending the 2023 NCAIR Annual Conference!

There's a QR code in your program for a conference evaluation form. You'll also get an e-mail following the conference with a link to the form, which will be available until 4/18.

Please take the opportunity at your earliest convenience to let the planning committee know your thoughts about this year's conference and where you would like to meet next year.

