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Guest Editorial
CoRE I-DREAM Issue: Summer Internships that Lead to Success

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Editorial

My name is Sam Baker and I am the Resource Specialist for the Innovation & Development through Resources, Education, Access, and Mentorship (I-DREAM) grant at East Central University. In this unique role, was asked to be the guest editor for this issue of the Chronical of Rural Education. When I joined the I-DREAM team in early February 2025, it was clear that one of my major upcoming projects was the organization and implementation of the inaugural I-DREAM Summer Curriculum Academy.

Like most things, The Summer Curriculum Academy and corresponding STEM Camp started as an idea, or at least a major portion of the larger idea that is I-DREAM. This time the idea belonged to Jo Anna Owens. Owens works as a Coordinator for East Central University's Education Department. She is quick to tell you that she does not have a background in education; she studied sociology and later tribal law. What she does have is a keen mind for identifying and solving problems. The problem at hand is not only is Oklahoma suffering from a teacher shortage, but, more acutely, it is suffering from a shortage of highly qualified and prepared teachers.

Seeing this need, Owens applied for a prestigious Hawkins Institute grant (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2026). The scope of the proposed grant was vast and complex, and her colleagues

cautioned her that proposals of this scale were rarely chosen the first time. She was advised to view the writing as something of a trial run for a more limited proposal that she could write in the future. Instead, the proposal was accepted, and in the Fall of 2024 I- DREAM was born.

I-DREAM supports students whose experiences and perspectives reflect the communities served by Oklahoma's schools, including those with First American legal status, bilingual students, first-generation college students or individuals from rural backgrounds**,** whose preparation and participation are vital to the state's educator workforce. The detailed steps and processes by which we plan to accomplish these goals are myriad and vast, but one of the most ambitious portions was the Summer Curriculum Academy and STEM Camp. Though I-DREAM's goal is to help facilitate the education of high-quality teachers in all secondary disciplines, finding qualified teachers of the STEM fields is particularly challenging. The decision was made during I-DREAM's inception that this would be the camp's focus. I was honored to play a role in the recruitment and organization of the camp and am pleased to report that it was by many, if not all, metrics a success.

What follows is an earnest "boots on the ground" recalling of the goals, planning, resources, and general activities of the Summer STEM Academy. I will describe the challenges and success of the camp itself and work that went into it, or as our curriculum coordinator Dr. Tessman would say, our "Cheers and Oh Dears." First, it should be stated that any good that came from this endeavor can be attributed almost entirely to three things: the courage, insight, and planning of Owens, the hard work and expertise of Dr. Darcey Tessman, and the trust, encouragement, and leadership of Dean Jerry Mihelic.

In the early months of I-DREAM, as we developed the processes and procedures outlined in the goals of the grant, this project loomed large, and within a month of my joining the team we began the early stages of planning. Our first step was to recruit Tessman as our curriculum coordinator. We would need her years of experience and expertise in guiding pre-service teachers to make sure that our interns stayed on track and that the lessons they produced were not only applicable and appropriate, but that they also were helpful to our interns as example lessons that they could make use of when they had classrooms of their own. Her involvement also secured the use of the Lending Library, a resource that Tessman maintains, and shares with educators throughout the state, with dozens of items from drones to Lego Robotics sets to Squishy Circuits, all with pre-built STEM lesson plans to go along with them.

The next, and arguably most important, step was to recruit our Interns. We were looking for six pre-service teachers that were far enough along in their collegiate training to be willing and able to teach grade school children STEM lessons, but for whom the lessons and practice would be valuable. To take part in this opportunity, perspective interns needed to be juniors or seniors in East Central University's early childhood or grade school programs or in one of our teaching certification programs.

Flyers were produced. Education instructors and professors spoke to their classes, and word of mouth began to spread. However, there was an unforeseen challenge in recruiting. College

students, especially pre-service teachers, seek summer employment well in advance. By the time many of ECU's future teachers became aware of the opportunity that we were providing they already had work, family, or social obligations that prevented them from taking part in such a substantial commitment of time and effort. Our goal was to recruit seven interns. By the time of the camp, we had five. Four undergraduate, pre-service teachers, and one alternatively certified teacher serving as our graduate intern. This turned out to be a happy accident, as the scale of the project was already daunting and the experience of these particular scholars turned out to be an excellent source of qualitative information that would lead to the research that is presented in this publication.

My experience as an educator brought me to the conclusion that we would want no more than 5 students for each teacher, especially since young children would be participating in the camp portion, and the classroom management skills of our pre-service teachers would already be taxed. Owens agreed and we invited 25 children to participate in the STEM camp portion of our endeavor. However, community interest was surprisingly high with parents applying on behalf of over 60 students. We accepted 30 with applicants being chosen on a first-come first-serve basis.

When the interns arrived, the first two weeks were spent in preparation. To that end, educators, academics, and technicians in different scientific fields were recruited to present our interns with a lesson in their perspective fields of scholarship, expertise, or practice that they could translate into appropriate lessons or activity for third and fourth grade students. These lessons ranged from testing the PH levels of water to coding. The third week was spent primarily in planning. The interns, with the help and insight of Tessman, prepared the activities and corresponding lesson plans to present to the children while Owens and I finalized the logistics, purchased necessary learning materials and prepared to have 30 guests between the ages of eight to eleven.

Then the children came. It has been more than 15 years since I did my student teaching. I remember the feeling that despite years of education in my field I was woefully unprepared to oversee thirty young people much less educate them. It was a moment of "sink or swim." I believe one of the primary benefits of this experience is that it gave our interns a chance to wade into the waters of education before the tossing in that is student teaching. They also had the support of one another and the guidance of Tessman. The waters were still rocky at times, but they made it through.

During a moment of stress, Tessman said something to Owens and me that stuck with us both through the challenges, struggles, and triumphs of the camp. Regardless of what else happened we would "keep the children safe and honor their dignity." In this at least we were successful. And, all of the children had a great time! As we checked the students out to their parents on the fourth and final day of the camp several asked if they could come again next year.

The fifth and final week of the Curriculum Academy was spent in debriefing and reflection by the interns. Each wrote a short essay and did an extensive interview about the experience. To a person they reported an edifying and transformative experience, and it is their recounting of their experiences that will make up much of the evidence that will be referenced in this publication.

So why the Summer Curriculum Academy and STEM Camp? I am not so brazen as to speak for the talented and accomplished educators and administrators that helped make this unique opportunity a success, but here's what I believe. There is a clear and present need. Oklahoma needs to produce skilled and prepared teachers in the STEM fields and beyond. ECU works hard to meet that need and we at IDREAM have the desire, skills, and thankfully the resources to help them do so. This camp is a major tool for us in accomplishing that lofty goal. I believe that the work we do not only has value but frankly is necessary. So, we are going to do it again next year… twice.

References

U.S. Department of Education. (2026, March 20). *Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence (Hawkins) Program*. https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-higher-education/improvement-of-postsecondary-education/augustus-f-hawkins-centers-of-excellence-hawkins-program#home