

Breakout Session Descriptions

Tuesday, February 17, 2026

Time: 2:00 PM - 2:50 PM

Session: 60 Miles to the Next Service

Presenter: Jason Puryear, Director, ECMC, The College Place

Audience: Pre-College Programs

Location: Spotlight

Description: This session will explore the complex barriers facing rural students as they seek access and complete higher education. These barriers may include (but are not limited to) geographic isolation, transportation challenges, financial constraints, limited digital access, familial obligations, time constraints and reduced support services. Through interactive discussion and activities, we will share best practices and develop actionable solutions to improve college access and success for rural students.

Presenter Bio: Jason Puryear is currently the director of ECMC's College Place (Alexandria). In this role, he works to demystify the college admissions process, helps students and families find ways to pay for postsecondary education, and assists students as they search for their best fit institution. As a college access professional, Jason has provided support to students, families, high schools and CBOs throughout the college admission, financial aid and enrollment process for over 16 years. Previous roles include time spent with the Upward Bound Programs at Virginia Tech and in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at the University of Virginia.

Jason grew up in Blackstone (southside Virginia) and knew that he wanted to go to college in the 6th grade. His mom supported this idea, even though she only had her G.E.D. Jason believes it's never too early to talk to students about post-secondary opportunities! As a first-generation college graduate, he is passionate about serving first-generation, Pell-eligible, and underserving students as they seek to access postsecondary educational opportunities. Jason holds a B.A. and M.Ed. from the University of Virginia.

Breakout Session Descriptions

Tuesday, February 17, 2026

Time: 2:00 PM - 2:50 PM

- Session: Safety and Protection of Minors on Campus and Community Agencies
- Presenters: Dr. Gregg Suzanne Ferguson, Director, Hampton University TRIO UB
Charles Johnson, Youth Protection Manager, University of Virginia
Ann Franke, HEPNet Volunteer General Counsel
- Audience: Pre-College TRIO Programs
- Location: Limelight
- Description: Every university and youth-serving program has an obligation to its students, employees, and visitors to conduct its operations and maintain its facilities in a manner consistent with its mission of service and access. Ensuring the safe and appropriate treatment of minors on campus is imperative. Through a coordinated effort with other universities and advocacy groups, we have brought awareness to the presence of minors on campus, and to prescribe minimum requirements for the screening, supervision, and training of individuals working with minors.
- Join us in this session to learn how to promote their protection, fulfill our obligations as mandated by law, and provide the best possible experience for any minors participating in activities.
- Presenter Bios: Dr. Gregg Suzanne Ferguson- "Dr. Fergie," is the Hampton University Upward Bound Director and Assistant Professor in the Department of Education, working hard to help deserving high school students in Virginia go to college and build teams of passionate educators to serve the nation. Dr. Fergie has secured millions of dollars in grants as a NYC and Pittsburgh public school teacher, the WV Arts in Education Coordinator, Program Leader for Youth Development/4-H and Ed faculty at WVSU, HU Upward Bound Director, and through current collaborations with the Call Me Mister and Teach For America Programs. She has written Protection of Children policy for HU and other universities and enlists amazing HU Student Support Services and McNair Scholars to serve as Mentors for the teens in the Upward Bound program. She is originally from New York City, a graduate of Harvard and Marshall Universities with degrees in Art, Counseling, and Education, and has two sons, 23 and 28, and a 6-year-old granddaughter.

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Session: Safety and Protection of Minors on Campus and Community Agencies

Presenter Bios: Charles Johnson - Charles is the Youth Protection Manager at the University of Virginia, where he oversees youth protection policy development and compliance. The Office of Youth Protection collectively supports over 250 programs and 30,000+ youth. Charles has more than 15 years of nonprofit experience working with youth, including work in juvenile justice, public health, and experiential education. Prior to his current role, he served in youth protection at VCU and managed a professional development initiative, as well as a continuous quality improvement intervention for local youth-serving organizations. He is certified as a Trauma Informed Care trainer, in addition to certifications from the David P. Weikart Center in Youth Work Methods and Social and Emotional Learning. Charles graduated from the College of William and Mary with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology and from Covenant Theological Seminary with a Master of Arts in Educational Ministry. He serves on the Board of Directors as the Secretary for the Higher Education Protection Network.

Ann Franke, HEPNet's volunteer General Counsel, provides consulting and legal services to colleges, universities, and other nonprofits nationally. She knows how to conduct investigations, improve messy policies, award and remove tenure, and generally help institutions function better. She has worked with governing boards, faculty, academic departments, staff, and students. Ann has served as an expert witness and testified before federal and DC legislative committees.

Breakout Session Descriptions

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Session: Designing High-Engagement Activities for TRIO Students

Presenter: Jerry Barney, Advisor, PennWest University, TRIO UB

Audience: Pre-College TRIO Programs

Location: Feature

Description: This interactive session is designed to equip TRIO professionals with a toolkit of high-engagement activities that can be implemented immediately to enhance student participation and learning. This session will share a variety of original activities that have proven effective in maintaining student interest while supporting academic, social, and college-readiness goals. Participants will be introduced to user-friendly online tools that can be used to create, adapt, and elevate these activities.

Presenter Bio: Jerry Barney is a TRIO Upward Bound and PennWest University California alumni who has earned two degrees from PennWest University: a bachelor's in secondary education (English) and a master's in special education. He plans to begin doctoral studies in the Fall of 2016. Throughout his professional career, Jerry has taught English in middle and high school settings for three years, as well as elective courses including Creative Writing and American Sign Language. In addition, he has worked as a Behavioral Health Technician (BHT) for the past eight years. Jerry also serves in a leadership role for PA TRIO as Secretary for the association and has played a key role in establishing an Advisory Board for his TRIO Upward Bound program alongside his director.

Breakout Session Descriptions

Tuesday, February 17, 2026

Time: 2:00 PM - 2:50 PM

- Session: Creating a 3D Interactive World
- Presenter: Frank DelleCurti, Program Director, Greater Erie Community Action Committee TRIO UB
- Audience: All Attendees
- Location: Act 1 & 2
- Description: This hands-on workshop introduces participants to Delightex, an accessible, browser-based platform that enables educators and students to create interactive 3D worlds, immersive stories, simulations, and virtual or augmented reality experiences. Participants will learn the fundamentals of building digital environments using an intuitive drag-and-drop editor and beginner-friendly visual programming tools such as CoBlocks.
- No prior technical experience is required. Attendees will explore how immersive technology can enhance STEAM learning, creativity, and student engagement within TRIO programs.
- Attendees are encouraged to bring a laptop and mouse to this session.*
- Presenter Bio: Frank DelleCurti has dedicated 24 years to the TRIO community, serving as the Director of the TRIO Upward Bound program at GECAC for 22 of those years. He is a former President of the PA TRIO Board and most recently spent over two decades as the Communications / Digital Communications Chair. Frank is also passionate about technology—especially 3D printing and computers.

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Time: 2:00 PM - 2:50 PM

Session: Making the Invisible Visible: Using Student Mapping to Empower Dreams and Transform Lives

Presenter: Jared VanMeter, Academic Advisor, Davis & Elkins College, TRIO UB

Audience: All Attendees

Location: Act 3 & 4

Description: Upward Bound programs serve students whose educational pathways are often shaped by factors beyond the classroom. This session explores how geographic and demographic mapping can be used as a practical, low-cost tool to better understand those factors and strengthen program planning, advocacy, and student support. Using real examples from a rural Appalachian Upward Bound service area, the presenter demonstrates how publicly available data, including American Community Survey (ACS), Bureau of Labor Statistics, and FCC broadband datasets, can be layered with student locations to reveal patterns of economic hardship, educational disadvantage, digital inequity, and youth disconnection. Designed for TRIO practitioners at all experience levels, this session focuses on transferability and accessibility, demonstrating how mapping can empower programs to tell a clearer, more compelling story about whom they serve and why their work transforms lives.

Presenter Bios: Jared VanMeter is an Upward Bound alumnus from Franklin, West Virginia, whose personal and professional journey reflects the transformative impact of access to education and opportunity. After graduating from college, Jared spent 14 years working as a geologist, gaining extensive experience in data analysis, mapping, and problem-solving within complex technical environments. He later transitioned into entrepreneurship and community development, where he now owns and operates multiple small businesses focused on revitalization, local investment, and sustainable growth.

In addition to his business ventures, Jared is actively working to establish a nonprofit community garden, aimed at improving food access, education, and community connection in rural Appalachia. He currently serves as an Academic Advisor with the Upward Bound program, where he combines his technical background, lived experience as a first-generation student, and commitment to community service to support students navigating the path to higher education.

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- Session: Genius Engagement: Genius Engagement: How Hip Hop & Edutainment Boost Recruitment, Attendance, And Engagement For Grant Outcomes
- Presenter: Bert Gervais, Student Engagement Specialist
- Audience: Directors & Program Coordinators
- Location: Encore
- Description: We all know the truth: attendance, retention, and outcomes start with STUDENT ENGAGEMENT! With 9000+ testimonials across 300+ schools, Genius Potential understands the proven plug-and-play strategies fusing hip hop, humor, and real-life relatability that have gotten students from city to rural environments showing up and taking action on TRIO outcomes. In our interactive session, you'll learn to curate the perfect workshop for your Spring or Summer programming that transforms low-interest topics like STEM, AI, FAFSA, and career readiness into fun, culturally relevant experiences that boost attendance, engagement, and action for even the most disengaged and hard-to-reach students. We'll also explore easy-to-use AI tools that cut your planning time in half, spark engagement, and help you do more with less!