

# RIPPLE EFFECTS MAP NC MOUNTAIN WEST REGION

**INCREASED  
CAPACITY IN  
EC DEV**

## Sustainability

Southwestern Commission Adoption of WeSpeakWNC  
WCU Continuation of Secret Shopper Review  
Bring WeSpeakWNC to more counties

**BUILT  
SECTOR  
AWARENESS**

## Research

3 Public Forums  
BRE Surveys and Focus Groups  
Employee Engagement Surveys  
Secondary Sector Research  
CREATE Business Asset Inventory  
Business Support Resource Listing

**IDENTIFIED  
SECTOR  
NEEDS**

**ATTRACTS  
GRAMT  
FUNDING**

## Wishes

More Student Opportunities to Connect with Business  
CREATE Sectors are high priority for Ec Dev  
Training programs on supplemental income opportunities

## Regional Sector Planning

3 Planning Sessions  
Regional Plan Development

**RESOURCE  
COLLABO-  
RATIONS**

**PARTNER  
WITH MORE  
RESOURCES**

## Resource Support

Got Your Back Business Summit  
WeSpeakWNC Conference  
WeSpeakWNC.Com  
Social Media

## Business Support

Got Your Back Business Summit  
WeSpeakWNC Conference  
WCU Secret Shopper Review  
Talent Jam  
Sector Expo  
WeThankYou Adventures

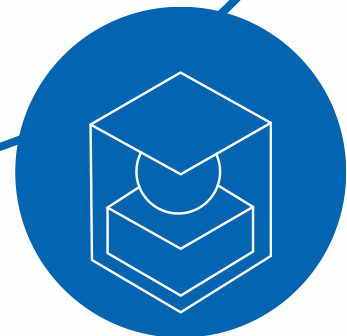
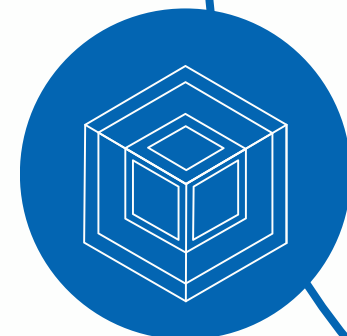
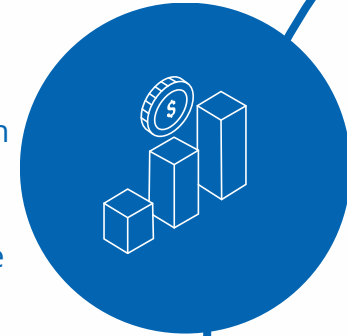
**PRACTICAL  
TOOLS FOR  
RECRUITING  
AND RETAINING  
EMPLOYEES**

**MORE SECTOR  
NETWORKING**



## CREATE BRIDGES

NC State Extension facilitated the CREATE BRIDGES Project in Jackson, Swain, Macon, and Graham Counties and the Qualla Boundary from 2020-2023. The project supports the retail, accommodation, tourism, and entertainment sectors.



**NEW PARTNER  
PROGRAMMING**

## Student Preparedness

Macon High School field Trip  
WeSpeakWNC Conference  
Talent Jam  
WCU Secret Shopper

## Employee Growth

Ready to Rock Online Training  
WeSpeakWNC Conference  
WeThankYou Adventures  
Ambassadorship Quiz

**LEADERSHIP  
DEVELOPMENT**

**STUDENT-  
RUN  
BUSINESS  
INCUBATOR**


**SOFT SKILLS  
TEAM  
BUILDING**

# Overview

Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) is a dynamic and participatory evaluation technique that has gained popularity in the fields of community development, program assessment, and social impact analysis. This method aims to visually capture the multifaceted impacts and outcomes of a project or initiative by engaging stakeholders in a collaborative mapping process. REM recognizes that the effects of an intervention often ripple out in unexpected ways, and it seeks to uncover these hidden connections and unintended consequences. Ripples will be primary, secondary, and beyond and will show both intended and unintended consequences.

In August 2023 CREATE BRIDGES staff held a series of focus groups with Mountain West stakeholders who had actively engaged in the CREATE BRIDGES project. This map captures the themes that emerged from these focus groups.

# Ripples Summary



**Research** was conducted through a series of surveys, focus groups, civic forums, and secondary data. This research was presented to the public at the CREATE Academy in September 2021. Ripple Mapping participants identified “greater CREATE sector awareness” and the dependency of the region’s economic health on the health of the CREATE sector as a direct ripple effect of the research. One participant acknowledged that as someone engaged in economic development he has a better understanding of how important retailers are to the region and as a result will direct more time to recruiting retailers.

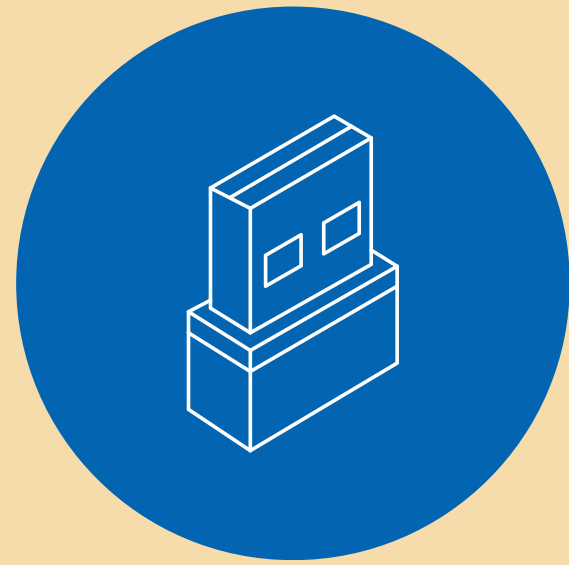
In addition, research identified CREATE sector needs, the primary one being the need to recruit and retain qualified staff. This discovery became the primary driver of strategy development for the region.



**Regional Strategy Development** began shortly after the CREATE Academy presentation of research findings. Three major goals were identified: (1) Improve CREATE business viability; (2) Increase CREATE employee career growth potential; and (3) Enhance public support of the CREATE sector regional economy.

Many ripple mapping participants mentioned that one of the biggest impacts of the CREATE BRIDGES process was the breakdown of silos that occurred during both the research and plan development stages. Agencies and businesses worked together to develop both relevant and achievable strategies. After a long period of isolation due to COVID, cross-collaborations started to occur among participating stakeholders.





**Business Support** strategies were the first to be implemented starting in early 2022. From regional distribution of the SPARK flyer to hospitality and tourism businesses (reminding customers to be kind to staff) to the in-person Got Your Back Business Summit in Sylva, NC, CREATE BRIDGES staff were attentive to employer needs expressed in the research phase.

Ripple mapping participants listed the value of the practical tools provided them at the Got Your Back Business Summit, which covered employee retention, workplace culture, equity at work, leadership, and other topics to help employers support their employees. The WCU student Secret Shopper review of 120 businesses was mentioned many times by participants as a surprise impact of the CREATE BRIDGES project, one that they hoped would continue to build Western Carolina University's engagement with the region.



**Employee Growth** strategies followed as planning began for the “Go Big or Go Home” WeSpeakWNC Conference. Held in February 2023 at Harrah’s Event Center in Cherokee, NC, this 2-day conference was jam-packed with information sessions and activities appealing to both employers and employees. This event attracted over 140 businesses, agencies, and employees and over 160 students. 40 businesses participated in the Sector Expo, and both employers and employees took a turn at the Talent Jam. Session topics covered leadership, regional economic development issues, social media, resource support, and more. Many ripple mapping participants praised the conference activities and impacts, including connections made and positions filled.


Other strategies designed to provide employee support included the online Ready to Rock training and the curated WeThankYou adventures that focused on team-building and soft skills development.

**Student Preparedness** strategies were incorporated to help develop the talent pipeline to staff CREATE businesses in the future. Career and Technical Education representatives had been involved in the CREATE BRIDGES process from the start. They were looking for more ways to engage businesses in the schools beyond career fairs.

An early experiment was the Macon County CREATE Field Trip which showcased 4 CREATE businesses to 25 high school students in Macon County. Besides opening the eyes of students to the necessary skills involved to work in the sector, two part-time jobs were filled as a result of the field trip.

Students have played a major role in the success of the project, from the WCU students who were the Secret Shoppers and who supported the conference event planning and implementation to the high school students who participated in the WeSpeakWNC conference activities. Ripple mapping participants mentioned public speaking, leadership, and critical thinking as major skills learned as a result of CREATE BRIDGES. WCU students were so inspired that they hope to build a student-run business incubator.





**Resource Support** has been an unanticipated impact of the CREATE BRIDGES process. Many ripple mapping participants pointed to the increase in clients they have seen as a result of the WeSpeakWNC Conference. Those who were business owners expressed their appreciation that they now understand that these resources are not just for startups, but are there to help businesses through every stage of their growth.

Many resource agencies were present at the conference, but their services were best described through a series of testimonials given by CREATE sector businesses. This peer-to-peer interaction made it easier for businesses to approach the resource providers.

In addition to the WeSpeakWNC Conference, business resource representatives from the Asheville area provided trainings at The Got Your Back Business Summit, and one ripple mapping participant thanked CREATE BRIDGES staff for bringing their expertise to the region.

WeSpeakWNC.com and social media also promote regional resources.





**Wishes** were among the ripples generated through the CREATE BRIDGES ripple effects mapping process. New programming is envisioned in the WCU Business Department not only to continue the Secret Shopper review of regional businesses, but also to support the “student-run business incubator” conceived by its students and other community-minded activities.

Teachers would like to see more field trips for their students, or opportunities where businesses come to the classroom, more internships, and summer externships.

Businesses are looking for more sector-specific networking opportunities. Resource providers are seeking more opportunities to cross-promote and network, as well as assist the citizens of the region learn more about supplemental income opportunities.

Most importantly, CREATE businesses desire to be a significant focus of future regional economic development planning.



**Sustainability** of the CREATE BRIDGES project, now known in the Mountain West region of North Carolina as WeSpeakWNC, is perhaps one of the most important ripples of the entire project. The Southwestern Commission has adopted WeSpeakWNC as part of the Mountain West Partnership's focus. Western Carolina University's College of Business commitment to supporting the sector through its academic programming is also evidence of the project's lasting impression. This recognition of the project as a benefit to the region is a big victory for everyone who participated in the project.

Other impacts of CREATE BRIDGES include the recognition the region has received for its efforts in supporting the CREATE sector, including the kudos it received from the NC Secretary of State. This recognition helps increase the region's ability to attract more grant funding as well as build its economic development capacity.

*-Prepared by Becky L. Bowen, CREATE BRIDGES Project Manager*

*NC State Extension*

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