



Impact Report

2025



PennState
Behrend

Susan Hirt Hagen Center for Community
Outreach, Research, and Evaluation (CORE)



OUR MISSION

Empowering Youth. Elevating Communities.

Susan Hirt Hagen CORE is a translational research center dedicated to strengthening communities through formal and informal youth mentoring programs, interactive trainings, empirical research on protective factors, and program evaluation services.

**ACCOMPLISHING OUR
MISSION THROUGH**

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

CORE makes a concerted effort to create a culture of hope for youth in Erie County. To achieve this, we help facilitate positive relationships between youth, peers, and adults by partnering with schools and education sites each academic year.

RESEARCH & EVALUATION

As a research center of Penn State Behrend, we have access to world class faculty and resources that allows us to perform both basic and applied research within schools and the community. We conduct high quality research in the areas of risk and protective factors for youth, bullying prevention, social determinants of health, growth mindset, hope, and empathy. Our team also specializes in all aspects of program evaluation – we are here to help guide your team in making data-driven, informed decisions to effectively meet your goals.



A NOTE FROM OUR DIRECTOR



Executive Summary

In 2025, Susan Hirt Hagen CORE at Penn State Behrend continued to strengthen its role as a trusted partner to schools, organizations, and communities seeking to support youth through evidence-informed, relationally grounded work. Across outreach, training, research and evaluation, CORE remained committed to the belief that meaningful change happens when rigorous data, collaborative practice, and human connection are held together. This year reflected steady growth, not through expansion for its own sake, but through deepened partnerships, and improved systems.

Throughout 2025, CORE advanced its mission by supporting mentoring and training initiatives that were responsive to community-identified needs, while simultaneously providing research and evaluation services that helped partners understand not just what they were doing, but why it mattered. Our team worked closely with a growing list of schools, nonprofits, and agencies to translate data into insight, and insight into action. This emphasis on learning, both organizational and communal, allowed CORE to serve as a bridge between research and real-world application.

As we look ahead, CORE is positioned to build on this foundation, continuing to serve communities with integrity, deepen partnerships through trust and transparency, and pursue research-informed solutions that honor the complexity of youth development. The work of 2025 reaffirmed our conviction that collaboration, careful evaluation, and shared learning are not ancillary to impact, but essential to it.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'JH', with a stylized flourish at the end.

James J. Hodge, Ph.D.

MEET THE TEAM

At CORE, our work is shaped not only by what we do, but also how we work together. We are an intentionally collaborative team of researchers, practitioners, and community partners who believe that meaningful impact is never the result of siloed expertise. We listen closely, think rigorously, and work across disciplines to ensure our efforts are grounded in evidence, informed by lived experience, and responsive to real community needs.

This shared posture of humility, curiosity, and cooperation allows us to learn from one another, strengthen our partnerships, and pursue solutions that are both thoughtful and practical.



James J. Hodge, Ph.D.
Director



Charisse Nixon, Ph.D.
Associate Director



Kristin Hesch, M.S.
Associate Director of
Community Outreach



Megan E. LaMotte, Ph.D.
Associate Director of
Research & Evaluation



Dantong (Amy) Yang, M.S.
Assistant Director,
Institutional & Applied
Research



Taylor Anderson, M.S.
Research & Evaluation
Coordinator



Mary Baird, M.S.
The Mentor Project
Consultant



Morgan Neville
Student Administrative
Assistant

SUSAN HIRT HAGEN CORE'S FACULTY AFFILIATES

At Susan Hirt Hagen CORE, we deeply value the expertise, partnership, and commitment of our faculty affiliates. Their contributions are central to our mission and essential to the impact of our work. Over the years, we have relied on their collaboration to strengthen our applied research on risk and protective factors and to advance rigorous, meaningful program evaluation. Our work is grounded in understanding the complex influences on individual, family, and community well-being, and our faculty affiliates bring the disciplinary depth, theoretical insight, and methodological rigor that elevate every stage of this effort.

They help refine research questions, strengthen study design, and apply advanced analytical methods to ensure our findings are both credible and actionable. Their expertise spans clinical psychology, educational psychology, early and special education, public health, and advanced quantitative methodologies, which enables us to approach complex challenges with precision and nuance. Faculty affiliates also play pivotal roles in our program evaluation projects, shaping evaluation frameworks, strengthening measurement strategies, and translating results into meaningful guidance for stakeholders.

Beyond their technical contributions, our faculty affiliates foster a culture of collaboration and inquiry. They mentor staff and students, expand opportunities for partnership, and connect CORE's work to broader academic and community networks. Simply put, we could not do this work without them. Their partnership expands our capacity, deepens our impact, and ensures that our research and evaluation efforts meaningfully advance prevention science and community well-being.



MEET THE FACULTY AFFILIATES



Dr. Michelle Cook
Special Education,
Elementary & Early
Childhood Education



Dr. Melanie Hetzel-Riggin
Director, School of
Humanities & Social Sciences
Clinical Psychology



Dr. Daniell DiFrancesca
Educational Psychology



Dr. Wilson Brown
Clinical Psychology



Joshua Slayton, M.A.
Mathematics

FACULTY AFFILIATE HIGHLIGHT

My experience as a faculty affiliate with Susan Hirt Hagen CORE has been remarkably fulfilling. The work that the team at CORE does is highly collaborative, productive, and impactful. Everyone involved has an important role to play, and their contributions are deeply valued. This collaborative environment allows for immense productivity, with many projects active at any given time.

The types of projects that the CORE team is engaged in, such as the implementation and evaluation of mentoring programs for school-aged children, have a real impact on the kids they serve. When I started my career at Behrend a few years ago, I was looking for opportunities to collaborate on projects that meaningfully impacted communities. I am grateful to have found those opportunities at CORE.

Joshua Slayton

BY THE NUMBERS: 2025 AT A GLANCE

This snapshot highlights the scope of CORE's work in 2025, capturing how research, training, mentoring, and partnership came together to serve youth and communities with intention and care.



7,427

Youth reached through evaluation projects

915

Youth served through mentoring initiatives

103

College student volunteers/workers/engaged

877

Number of people trained

24

Number of trainings delivered

10

Schools engaged through evaluation & mentoring

11

Research and Evaluation projects conducted

WE ARE DEDICATED TO STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

CORE is committed to investing in the growth and development of undergraduate and graduate students at Penn State Behrend through high-impact, experiential learning. Aligned with Behrend's Open Lab model, students are fully integrated into CORE's Community Outreach and Research & Evaluation teams, where they engage in applied research and translate evidence into practice. By engaging students as researchers and emerging leaders, CORE advances Behrend's mission to foster innovation, applied learning, and workforce-ready graduates prepared to make meaningful impact.



Shandi Folmar



Pucong Liao



Kiara Diaz-Gutierrez



Lindsay Albright



Kylie Kindle



Serrena Conklin



Morgan Neville



Elle Blakeslee



Elliot Swanson



Kayleigh Porter



Amara Papalia



Michael Sopko



Emily Warrene



Tina Yu



Audrey Decker



Carson Delon



Miesha Parker



Ian Murray



Hanna Long



Zach Babb

STUDENT IMPACT

ZACH BABB



While a master's student in Applied Clinical Psychology at Penn State Behrend, I was employed by CORE as a member of the Community Outreach team, where I helped to revise and implement curriculum for The Mentor Project. My role uniquely expanded to include contributions to the Research and Evaluation team, enabling close collaboration and deep engagement in the Center's community-based translational research initiatives. Through this work, I observed firsthand an outstanding organizational commitment to intentionally deliver research-informed insights directly to community stakeholders, both within Erie County and nationwide. Now, as a doctoral student in clinical psychology, I carry forward a sincere and enduring commitment to purposeful translational research, a commitment that was unquestionably transformed by my experiences at CORE. I am grateful to be developing research initiatives focused on traumatic stress treatment within community mental health clinics, and I consistently draw upon the training, values, and mentorship I received as a member of CORE.



COMMUNITY OUTREACH



Community Outreach Summary

Kristin Hesch, M.S., Associate Director of
Community Outreach

This year reinforced the importance of listening as a form of leadership. Community feedback played a critical role in shaping how programs were delivered, refined, and evaluated, ensuring that CORE's support was both relevant and sustainable. As we look ahead, our outreach work remains committed to building connective tissue across communities, linking people, resources, and insight in ways that foster resilience, shared ownership, and meaningful outcomes for youth.

IMPACT STORY

Kelly Allen

School Counselor, James W. Parker Middle School
General McLane School District

The Mentor Project, through Susan Hirt Hagen CORE, has been an incredibly positive experience for our students at JWPMS. Through consistent support and encouragement from dedicated college mentors, students have grown in confidence, communication skills, and connection to school.

What stands out most is the program's intentional, student-centered approach. Mentors build meaningful relationships that help students navigate academics, personal goals, and everyday middle school life, and students genuinely look forward to their time together.

This partnership has become a valuable part of our school community. We are forever grateful for The Mentor Project and Susan Hirt Hagen CORE. Our students, and our school, are better because of it.

RESEARCH & EVALUATION



Research and Evaluation Summary
Megan E. LaMotte, Ph.D., Associate
Director of Research & Evaluation

In 2025, CORE's research and evaluation efforts focused on helping partners move beyond surface-level metrics toward deeper understanding and meaningful learning. Our work emphasized rigorous, context-sensitive evaluation that honored both quantitative data and the lived experiences behind it. By collaborating closely with schools and community organizations, we ensured that data collection and analysis were not extractive, but useful, designed to inform decision-making, strengthen programs, and clarify impact.

IMPACT STORY

Clinton Faupel

Co-Founder and Executive Director, RemedyLIVE

I am deeply grateful for the time we've spent partnering with Penn State Behrend and the Susan Hirt Hagen CORE Research Group over the past seven years. Their collaboration has strengthened several key Get Schooled Tour projects and helped us better support student mental wellness—moving students out of hidden struggles and into meaningful conversations that lead to a fuller life. I'm especially thankful for their ownership of this work and for the evidence they've provided to help RemedyLIVE demonstrate the impact of what we do.



OUR PARTNERS



United Way



Erie's Public Schools



UnifiedErie



Erie Community
Foundation



Erie Insurance



RemedyLIVE



Iroquois School
District



Girard School
District



General McLane
School District



Wattsburg Area
School District



Harbor Creek School
District



Eagle's Nest

LOOKING AHEAD

GOALS FOR 2026 AND BEYOND

As CORE looks to 2026 and beyond, the focus is on intentional growth that deepens community and team impact. The work ahead builds directly on what was learned in 2025, clarifying what works, refining how CORE partners with communities, and aligning capacity with calling.

Modeling a Balanced, Mission-Driven Culture

In 2026, Susan Hirt Hagen CORE will continue to model a balanced, mission-driven approach that demonstrates how high-quality work and human well-being can coexist within an academic setting. This includes being more intentional about team-centric conversations in meetings, creating space for shared reflection, collaboration, and mutual support alongside project updates and outcomes. CORE will also prioritize relational investment by scheduling frequent team building activities throughout the year, reinforcing connection, trust, and sustainability. These practices reflect CORE's conviction that healthy teams are essential to healthy work, and that long-term impact is strengthened, not compromised, when people are cared for well.



Strengthening Financial Sustainability for Long-Term Impact

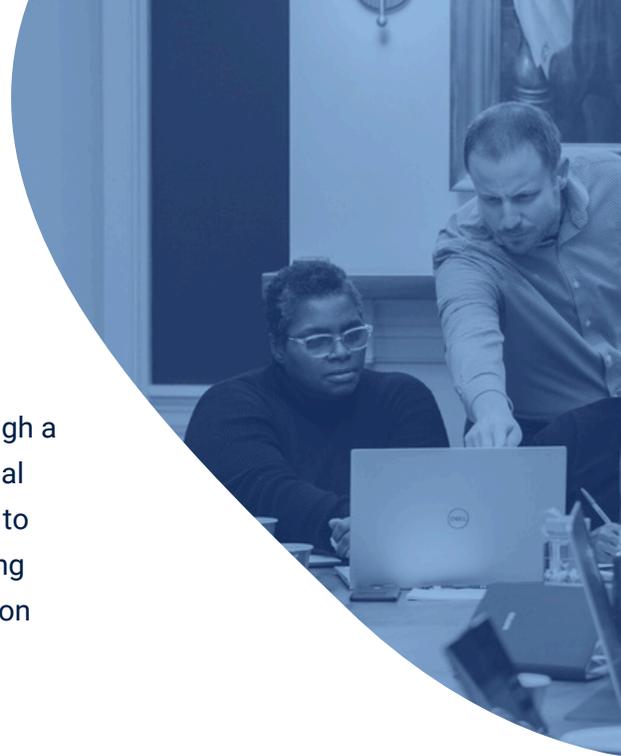
In 2026, CORE will focus on strengthening financial stability through a strategic, diversified funding model designed to support intentional growth. As part of this effort, CORE will strengthen its foundation to expand school, community, and university partnerships by securing significant, long-term funding through state, federal, and foundation grants, and sustained university support.

Strengthening Partnerships with Erie County Schools

CORE will continue positioning itself as a trusted, go-to partner for Erie County schools by providing reliable support, data-driven guidance, and programming that leads to measurable outcomes. Central to this effort is strengthening The Mentor Project as a clearly defined, evidence-based program while also hosting strategic school leadership gatherings that foster relationship, shared learning, and collaboration. Together, these efforts will deepen trust, align practice with evidence, and expand CORE's impact across the local education landscape.

Deepening CORE's Role Within the University

In 2026, CORE will continue to strengthen our collaborations within University Park, including the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) and the Prevention Research Center (PRC). We will also advance community engaged research and contribute actively to the Community-Engaged Research (CEnR) Group within SSRI at University Park. CORE faculty will help elevate evaluation practice, strengthen cross-campus collaboration, and reinforce Penn State's commitment to research that serves real communities with rigor and integrity.



**WE ARE INTENTIONAL IN OUR CARE FOR
PEOPLE AND OUR USE OF DATA TO SERVE THE
EVER-GROWING NEEDS OF OUR SCHOOLS,
COMMUNITY, AND UNIVERSITY.**

- Susan Hirt Hagen CORE, Leadership Team



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