



# FAIRMONT STATE UNIVERSITY™

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## Office of Sponsored Programs

January 29, 2026



## SPECIAL FEATURE

### The Road Ahead: NASA ERC Lives on at Fairmont State University

The famous philosopher and academic Allan Bloom is quoted as saying, “Education is the movement from darkness to light.” Bloom was highlighting the transformative power of education and how it can lead to both personal and societal growth.

As a regional public university, Fairmont State is especially interested in furthering the educational prospects of West Virginia’s students. One way the University does this is by supporting ongoing sponsored programs and projects on campus. This varies from project to project and can look like providing in-kind support through facility usage or cash match to invest in the work of the grant. One sponsored program that Fairmont State is picking up in a big way is the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Education Resource Center (ERC).

As the federal government begins to reevaluate existing grant programs, some grant programs have been terminated or adjusted to better fit federal funding priorities. When the NASA ERC team learned in October 2025 that their NASA grant was going to end, they were concerned about the closure of a decades-long project to further Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programming, particularly beneficial to students and K-12 educators throughout West Virginia. To ensure this valuable educational programming continues, Fairmont State will now fund the work of the ERC.

Since 2000, the Katherine Johnson NASA Independent Verification and Validation (IV&V) ERC facility has served as a cornerstone for STEM education within West Virginia. Fairmont State University has partnered with this facility throughout various grant cycles by hosting major robotics, drone, and coding events for students in elementary schools through college (K-16).

Fairmont State personnel collaborated with NASA IV&V to

- Demonstrate and facilitate the use of educational technologies;
- Provide training for in-service, pre-service, and informal educators using NASA curriculum support products;
- Target specific domains or initiatives of interest to the NASA IV&V program;
- Partner with local, regional, and state education organizations to become part of the systemic initiatives in the state; and
- Lead the region in providing educational and competitive STEM programs.

Serving as author and principal investigator of the NASA ERC grant since 2002, Dr. Deb Hemler, Interim Dean of College of Science and Technology, has been much of the impetus behind these NASA ERC grants over the years and will continue her work in this new iteration of the project.

“I have been fortunate to have an incredible team to bring my STEM professional development dream to fruition and then far exceed what I thought possible for student STEM engagement. We have been offering targeted elementary and secondary curriculum workshops for both pre-service and in-service teachers, webinars, Loan & Learn Kit training, video resources, student STEM engagement events, and grant support for other universities, government agencies, and NASA contractors,” said Hemler.

The impact of these initiatives upon the local community is visible in the sheer number of West Virginia K-16 educators and students. From 2018-2023, 42,508 students benefitted from the Loan & Learn Kits, which educators can reserve for their classrooms to study topics with their students such as basic rocketry, coding express, robots and ratios, and 3D printing. Similarly, over 4,000 students attended STEM workshops offered by NASA ERC, even when in-person workshops were very sparse due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2024 alone, NASA ERC hosted 45 workshops for nearly 300 classrooms, 10 camps, and 37 robotics events, engaging more than 5,000 students.

When Fairmont State learned the federal funding was not going to continue for NASA ERC, the University knew the program had to continue. To do this, the University institutionalized some of the costs associated with the

grant and kept on ERC employees to ensure they could continue their important work connecting West Virginia youth and educators with quality STEM engagement.

The Fairmont State College of Science and Technology ERC (Fairmont State ERC) will continue to provide resources to local educators and students in North Central West Virginia, carrying on the mission of the original grant to expand opportunities for West Virginia's students and educators as well as providing access to facilities and supported application of expertise in their efforts to meet national and state education standards.

Current faculty and staff involved in the Fairmont State ERC include Dr. Deb Hemler, Interim Dean of the College of Science and Technology; Dr. Todd Ensign, Program Manager; Josh Revels, STEM Education Outreach Specialist; and John Holbrook, Robotics Lead.

“We have been operating as the outreach arm for NASA IV&V and the fact that it is Fairmont State has been a bit of a well-kept secret, even on our own campus! By being on campus, I think Fairmont State will finally receive the recognition it deserves for delivering all of these wonderful programs,” expressed Hemler.

Resources for educators will continue to be available through the Fairmont State ERC, including the Loan & Learn Kits, as well as the educator workshops to instruct teachers in the use of Loan & Learn Kits.

To further support their students, educators can also request student workshops and student webinars. Student workshops (available for middle school and above) are field trip experiences to the Education Resource Center on Fairmont State’s campus in which classes of up to 25 students can engage in STEM activities. Student webinars are virtual experiences with one of Fairmont State ERC’s Education Outreach Specialists, some of which are pre-recorded in topics like Planetary Geology and Meteorite Mysteries.

“We are looking forward to coordinating with our campus visitation office so students can receive some STEM enrichment and see Fairmont State’s campus as a STEM hub for the surrounding community,” said Hemler.

Community events the Fairmont State ERC will coordinate through the West Virginia Robotics Alliance include various STEM competitions such as VEX Robotics Competitions, First Lego League Challenges, and The American Rocketry Contests. The West Virginia Robotics Alliance furthers these unique robotics programs in the state by supporting and hosting qualifying and championship tournaments through the state; providing equipment, training, and support for new teams; and hosting robotics summer camps.

Hemler shared, “If you’ve never attended one of our events, you are missing out! The energy, the student engagement, the STEM collaboration, and fun makes it a great way to spend a weekend. It’s such a positive environment, it inspires you to volunteer.”

The support from numerous partners and volunteers has enabled the ERC STEM competition outreach to impact over 2,000 West Virginia students

annually. Fairmont State College of Science and Technology plans to continue this work through their ERC, sharing not only educational resources but also facilitating educational experiences to truly grow the STEM knowledge base of students and educators within the region. While the closure of the original NASA ERC grant marks a huge change in federal funding that has impacted North Central West Virginia, Fairmont State is honored to continue this vital STEM education programming to ultimately nurture and retain local talent.

Anyone interested in learning more about Fairmont State University College of Science and Technology ERC can visit their website [here](#).

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**SPECIAL NOTE:**

Any grant application, proposal, or request for external funding must be reviewed and approved **prior to submission** through an internal process managed by the Office of Sponsored Programs. Please *visit our website* for more information and to access the required forms which facilitate the internal review and approval process.



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