Episode 55: Sarah Williams

# KL: Katie Linder

# SW: Sarah Williams KL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode fifty-five.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the shows website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I am joined by Dr. Sarah Williams, the Director of the STEPP Program, a student support program at East Carolina University designed to provide college access and ongoing support for students with learning disabilities. She also serves as Principal Investigator for the College STAR initiative, a grant-funded project focused on helping participating campuses create educational environments that are welcoming for students who have different approaches to learning. Prior to her work with STEPP and College STAR, Sarah was a part of the ECU College of Education faculty and a middle school special education teacher in North Carolina. Sarah received her Bachelors of Science and her Master’s Degree in Special Education from East Carolina University and her PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Thanks for joining me today, Sarah.

**SW:** Thank you Katie! Thanks for having me.

**KL:** So I first came across your work, you were actually recommended to me by another podcast guest we had who was representing CAST. Which is an organization that works on universal design for learning research, and she had told me about some of your work with College STAR and I was really intrigued and so I was hoping you could start just by talking a little bit about what is College STAR.

**SW:** Sure, sure, College STAR, it’s a grant founded project that in essence it’s an initiative that is enabling campuses, different universities in the North Carolina system right now, to come together and learn how to be more welcoming places for students who have learning differences. We’re doing that by focusing on providing direct support to students who may have previously been marginalized or slipped through our cracks on our campuses, but at the same time thinking more broadly and trying to infuse wide reaching instructional support across our campuses with that focus on universal design for learning. So all of that, you know, only half of that happens through quite a bit of collaboration and dialogue with a lot of different educational partners. On our respected campuses, across participating campuses, that also there’s other partners like our funders, with the k-12 community, with our community college partners, our students, our partners, and sort of that work together. We feel like that’s going to help us, you know, move forward sort of in that mission.

**KL:** So this is a prettycomplex project, so I want to dig in a little bit more. So first of all, how many campuses or kind of stakeholder groups are involved? Can you give rough ball park?

**SW:** Right now, we are fairly focused on work right now on 3 primary anchor campuses within the UNC system. East Carolina University is one and that’s where I’m located. Appalachian State University and Fayetteville State University are the ones working most closely with the projects right now. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro is also in our network and other campuses in the system in smaller ways, but our 3 campuses are doing the most intense work now. We’re looking ahead in expanding our network (and that’s exactly where we are) with others that might be interested in working with us.

**KL:** I know that this is a project that has multiple different funders that are contributing to it. Can you talk a little bit about how the project began and how funders were attracted to the project?

**SW:** Absolutely. We have had multiple funders connect with us and we’re really thankful for that relationship because our funders have been true partners in the learning that has been occurring over the past several years. College STAR began actually as a conversation between the Oak Foundation and the University of North Carolina general administration staff. They really wanted to get together and think about how we can learn more from this issue of learner variability in the university setting and make a positive difference for bright and talented students who may not making it graduation. So, that conversation started in that way. The Oak Foundation is based in Geneva, Switzerland, but they have offices all around the world and they have been our biggest partner in funding for College STAR. They’re this really neat foundation because they value and engage learning alongside their guarantees and are very hands on in very appropriate and supportive ways about the learning process. They have been just tremendous, not just in terms of funding, but also in partnership. The North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation has been a part of this project since very early in the stages and then several foundations based in Greensboro have been working with us and we’re very thankful for that partnership.

**KL:** So, it sounds like in this particular project, a lot of the funding is more regional or state-based (coming from people in the state or in the region).

**SW:** That’s right. It did start from a UNC system initiative with plans for learning as much as we could locally on each of our respective campuses, then at the state level and then expanding more nationally after we had some time with this work. I connected with the project fairly early on. I worked with the Student Support Program at East Carolina University our program is focused on serving students who have identified learning disabilities and applied to our program during their junior year of high school. The students who come into our program – we work with them throughout their senior year of high school to get ready for college and, once they’re on campus, behind the scenes as they major in whatever they want. We’re helping them make that transition to this new educational environment and be connected. I had worked with the Oak Foundation around the STEPP program before, so that’s how I became a part of that larger conversation. From there, I was talking across the state with different focus groups and stakeholders on each campus to cast a big vision of what we would need to consider, who we would need to include in the dialogue and how we would need to balance working directly with students but also working with students all across campus to think about this issue on a broader level.

**KL:** That’s so interesting because what you’re really pointing to is the importance of networks for building out projects like this and you mentioned that you worked with this foundation before and then you started having these dialogues and conversations and bringing stakeholders to the table. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit more about that. How have you found getting the right folks at the table for this project? What are some of the methods that you’ve worked on for building out that network and making sure that you have the right partners?

**SW:** That has absolutely been critical and that has probably, as a side note, been one of the most important points I think that we should make. The College STAR initiative is only going to be as strong as the partnerships that we develop. This is work that can’t happen in silence, so that’s a good bit of our work in terms of identifying key voices and key people to be around the table to contribute to this discussion, both from K-12 settings and post-secondary settings. One of the nice things about this project is that it bridges both of those educational settings in different ways. On one hand, looking at students as they prepare to transition to college and even decide if college is an option for them or a good fit for them and not only help graduate from high school and also help them come to their next learning setting knowing what to expect and prepare them to become effective learners in that setting. A lot of our dialogue had needed to be with individuals in the K-12 setting. That might be special education teachers, general education teachers, students, parents, individuals who work with students from services such as vocational rehabilitation services or other agencies that provide support to students in transitions. They have a really important voice as guidance counsellors. On the other hand, on the campus side of things, we’re talking about many students who have identified disabilities. How can we get them to connect with our disability support service providers, first year student support offices and networks, faculty members, librarians, tutors, advisors? All of those voices needed to be a part of these conversations so that we really are looking at a comprehensive picture. One of the things we’ve learned is that public schools and universities don’t talk to each other very much, especially around this issue. Students with disabilities receive supports that are governed within the public school setting with one set of rules, one type of legislation and mission. When they come to the university setting, that all changes pretty significantly. Universities are governed by different policies or legislation or missions. That’s been one of the most exciting pieces of the College STAR projects; to have those dialogues between those two settings across each of our campuses so that we really can make a difference. One of the things that we’ve learned is that this doesn’t happen very often and we’ve had some “a ha” moments, but were really surprising where we think “We’re really putting up barriers sometimes very unintentionally” that are causing challenges to students who we might be able to do a bit about.

**KL:** Mm hmm. This project - I love it because it has so many layers. We’re going to come back, take a break and come back and talk a little bit more about what it means to start such a significant research endeavor. So, back in a moment!

[*music plays*]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Sarah your College STAR project is so fascinating to me, and part of the reason is because it is kind of growing and evolving into become a significant research endeavor, and I’m wondering if we could talk tactics. Starting with, you know when you’re planning to start a relatively large research project, how do you begin, what were some of the steps that you took to get this really launched and off the ground?

**SW:** Sure yeah, it is such a challenge when you’re thinking about bringing together a lot of different people from a lot of different settings. This project didn’t begin as a research project but now has evolved to a place where research is becoming very important to us, and so this one began with sort of organic development of a two-fold model on three different college campuses. Each campus was charged with developing a two-fold initiative, and with a complete lack of creativity we called that Component A and Component B.

[*laughs*]

**SW:** But Component A is that student support side of things; identifying students on your campus who may historically have been slipping through the cracks and students who have this sort of learner vulnerability that is a part of the target population of College STAR. But, learning how to identify those students, bring them to the right supports and help them develop the skills to be strategic in the college environment and meet their educational goals. But at the same time recognize that those students are in classes all across our campuses with thousands of other students and none of us learn the same way. So Component B on each campus was to be, you know, cast a wider net and focus on infusing principles of universal design for learning in as many different educational environments as we could on our campuses. So our three campuses were charged with developing these two-fold models, they were not necessarily to be cookie cutter models, we all had the same common core question and the same charge, but we needed to build models that addressed those questions in ways that fit with each of our very different campuses cultures, needs, resources, expertise etc. So we began by setting those two large common goals to find out what is the transition experience like for students with learning differences who historically may have been marginalized or slipping through our cracks? And secondly, how do we infuse the principles of universal design for learning across campus. And so we spent the first three years really, on each of our individual campuses building those models and then communicating regularly, sharing ideas, working together and watching for common elements that regardless of those different environments, sort of surfaced across each campus. And then, so we began campus-specific, our evaluation models were focused mostly on each campus, and as we found common elements that surfaced across each of our campuses, and students support and instructional support and faculty support, then we began to zero in on those project wide. And so now our research efforts is focusing on those elements that surfaced on each of our campuses as important to this work no matter the context and no matter the environment. So that’s the way that we chose to approach that.

**KL:** I like your focus on, and I think this is really practical, on identifying what is the problem, what is a potential solution and what is the implementation plan to go forward, and kind of starting with those very practical steps. I’m wondering if you could talk about some of the challenges in planning a research endeavor and maybe some tactics that you’ve used for responding to those challenges. I would imagine that you’ve, that all kinds of things crop up as you’re working on these kinds of projects.

**SW:** Yes! [*laughs*] They really do, so I’ll try not to sound so random in my responses, but they are, and sometimes they’re expected and you can plan for them, and sometimes you have to be nimble enough to bring in supports or redirect or regroup when you need to and both of those things have happened. I think, I guess one of the challenges we had and some things we’ve tried to pay attention to are just making sure that we have multiple perspectives and the right expertise around the table whenever we engage in any of the different parts of this project. So for example for us, we often have to make sure that we have research expertise in the area that we needed. Some of our work involves quantitative research and pulling numbers from across our campuses or even from smaller sets of students or faculty members, and we need to have people who know how to do that well around the table. But a lot of our work is about culture change or you know sort of things that don’t fit onto spreadsheets very easily. So bringing on these qualitative researchers or individuals who have expertise in all sorts of different areas and having them on the right teams. That’s been important to us, so that we get good, we get strong data, but then we also have a good understanding about the context from which those data are derived and can really make sense of it. We’ve also in our smaller communities have challenges that we didn’t expect in terms of building communities of faculty members who are becoming scientists for example in their own classrooms, and evaluating their impact of what they’re doing on their students’ learning. We didn’t expect this but early on as we were making communities of faculty members, sometimes faculty members were a little hesitant to say, “You know, I’m really hesitant about doing this.” And we would have a mix of faculty members say, who are on tenure track or with tenure, or we would have faculty members who are teaching instructors and then we had graduate students, you know we had a nice mix of members on the team, but the research piece of it was a challenge. Finally, early on some of the individuals who were teaching instructors would speak up and say, “Look, research isn’t typically a part of my charge. I’m here to teach, I’m not necessarily trained in the area of doing research, I’m going to need some support in that.” And then later, some of the faculty members would say, “Look I’m a scientist, I’ve done tons of research, I’m supposed to know what I’m doing in terms of research but I don’t know how to research with people, so I’m scared to research with my students. I don’t want to do them harm, I don’t know things about IRB or human subjects research and so I need some help with that.” And sometimes they were a embarrassed to say that. So it took us a little bit of time to figure out the type of support we needed to provide to our faculty learning communities, so that they felt safe to try new things in the classroom and engage in some actual research about that and involve their students in that process, so they felt safe to admit that they needed some help, that help was right there and readily available so that they’re able to engage in that work in a way that felt supported. That was a big learning curve for us in terms of creating these faculty learning communities and a good one, a lot of good has come out of those discussions. And this project has so many moving parts, that one of the challenges we’ve had is to stay aligned with our overarching goals and visions, but that we’re able to move forward as well. So one of the things that we’ve had to do either in the overall project or with the smaller elements of it, develop and maintain systems for regular communication. Regular standing meetings, people have sort of a love-hate relationship with meetings so one of the things we’ve tried to do is ensure that working groups meet regularly and carve out a good bit of time for their meetings. But their meetings are working sessions, they’re not times when they come together and do a lot of talking and leave with a really long checklist, but that when they come together they’re actually engaging in whatever it is that they’re working on at the time. So whether it’s the lit reviews or analyzing the data or working on dissemination that they have standing times for doing that working, that they’re working sessions together. Part of what we’ve done with the grant for the project is build in accountability for that things. And people have expressed that they really appreciate that structure, that they really appreciate accountability so that this doesn’t’ begin as this well-intentioned work that sort of dissolves because we’re all so busy. So I guess, building in structure, making sure that the people have the right supports and being really ready to dig and learn what support they need and creating supports that make them feel safe in moving forward and then bringing on multiple perspectives. Those have been three areas of challenge for us that we’ve needed to really think about how to approach addressing.

**KL:** Those are so helpful, and I especially love the tip about turning meeting into working sessions, I think that that’s something that many of us can take up into our own work. We’re going to take another brief break, when we come back we’ll hear a little bit more from Sarah about what she’s learned so far in the College STAR project and also how it will continue to develop in the future. Back in a moment.

[*music plays*]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Sarah, as you’re working with this project, I’m wondering if we can talk a little bit about what you’ve learned so far. You’ve already shared some really helpful nuggets of different practical things that you’ve been working on, but what are some of the things that you’re sort of taking away at this point, that you think might be helpful for others?

**SW:** Sure, and well just so you know some background on that, before College STAR even began nationally, through good work from Linn Newman or Joe Medals, IES, lots of other folks, we’re learning that overall, trends are pretty positive in terms students with learning disabilities or learning differences graduating from high school and attending some sort of college. So those trends were really encouraging when we got started, but the trends that they were finding were not as promising for things like persistence and graduating in the post-secondary setting. So what we knew when we started was that we have a lot to learn about, ensuring that students not only graduate from high school, but that they enter that next setting knowing what to expect and become effective learners in that new environment. And as I mentioned earlier that colleges and universities need to know how to meet them where they are and be places where bright and talented student can thrive. So that’s where we kind of wanted to land with College STAR, knowing those trends are helpful, but we needed implementation level, boots on the ground kind of programming and research to understand those spaces. So we’re building, so that we’re building on practices that are out there and not erecting those unintentional barriers. So some of the things that we’re learning, well the first thing that we’re learning is that all of this takes time, you know there’s no quick fix. There are a lot of stakeholders, a lot of progress to make, but we have been excited for the past five years or so to see the needle moving a little bit, and over time, with College STAR, some bubbling to the surface promising practices. We’ve had faculty members working through learning communities, implementing and exploring new practices in their classrooms and evaluating the impact that they’re having on their students when they do that. We’ve seen promising practices in tutoring setting, and different things that tutors can do is that they can work with students to really help them be successful back in the classroom. We’ve been developing resources based on conversations across the state with teachers and faculty, and parents and students. Some examples of those resources are, you know, high school transition curriculum that’s evolved from the project and some training videos that we’ve been able to be working on. From the conversations and perspective from multiple settings that we think are going to be really useful. We’ve been creating online modules and gathering UDL resources for faculty members to use in the classrooms, and one of the fun things that has happened is that students that come along side with this mission began a podcast series themselves, their calling it LD State in Mind. They depilated a couple episodes last year and they’re going to be building that this year in a student blog. So all of what is beginning to surface has been pretty exciting.

**KL:** That is, I mean it’s incredible to see those kinds of artifacts that are coming out of this project from such a range of groups and we will make sure to link to those, you know, pod casts and things in the show notes so people can check them out. You know, where are you hoping that college STAR will go from here? How will it continue to develop? What are kind of next steps and what’s the future looking like?

**SW:** Sure, well I’m sure as you can tell, now the project has been mostly focused on designing you know, weaving together supports on each of our campuses, developing new ones where has been needed, relationship building, and doing some piloting – experimenting with things. And that’s one of things we’re so thankful about in terms of funders – is that they have let us do that. They let us try things that we weren’t sure if they were going to work or not. And work through, you know, that learning process with them. Now though, it’s time for us to do two things, you know, first it’s time for us to start more broadly disseminating the resources that have been developed through the project and what we are learning – that’s very practical and useful. And the k-12 setting and the university setting, but also acknowledging there’s not a resource bases yet behind those resources that have been developed. So our next step right now is adding a research layer to what we are doing, adding a research layer ourselves, you know, to sort of test the practices that we’ve been implementing and the resources that we’re developing. But we also need researchers to come along side us with this, faculty researchers, graduate students, and that sort of thing. So those are sort of our two big current goals to continue increase awareness about learner availability in the university setting and the universal design for learning, but it also, you know, encourages and support instructors to implement a scholarship of teaching and learning in the classroom. Building broader communities of practice who are engaged in that sort of research and continue to try to move the needle in terms of collaboration of secondary and post-secondary settings.

**KL:** So if we have, you know, listeners of the podcast who are intrigued and want to know more about the project and want to think about ways to potentially collaborate, have you got a sense of you know, how maybe other people, maybe outside of your state could kind of be engaged in this and you mentioned kind of research partners, could you talk a little more about that?

**SW:** Absolutely and the research partnership through, you know, would be the best place right now to get connected. There are a lot of ways to do that, you know, if there were faculty members who are listening and they are interested in trying something new in their classroom that’s related to universal design for learning and really helping their student become more engaged and successful in their classroom – I would love to hear from them. They maybe be able to become a part of some of our faculty learning communities that are doing exactly that, you know, experimenting with their instructional practices and applying research in the classroom to evaluate the impact that’s having and whether it’s causing the results we were hoping for. But also on a larger scale, anyone that is interested in research, and teaching and learning at the college setting and especially for students who approach learning in maybe non-traditional way, we need that, we need that with the project. Many of the people who are working with the College STAR initiative are, you know, getting the work done, the hands on, the building, the students support mode and sometimes they don’t have the time, or sometimes they don’t have the training to add that research layer and would just really welcome individuals who you know, who would like to talk to us more about that.

**KL:** Sarah, I think that this project, I mean I’m so glad that we could kind of talk about some of the layers of it and the important work that you are doing and just kind of the complexity of it and how many stake holders are involved. And I think your point earlier about you know, this kind of project takes some time and such an important one and it’s a significant investment, it’s kind of a long term rollout in some ways of a multiphase project of you know, where these things are going. So thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and talking with me today about College STAR, it was really interesting.

**SW:** Thank you, I enjoyed it!

**KL:** And thanks so much to our listeners for joining us on this week’s episode of Research in Action, I’m Katie Linder and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

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