November 2026 Edition: 13

Campus Update

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Homecoming 2026 brings the "Spirit of Roary" to campus and community



Alumni Gala Dinner and Dance celebrates students and alumni

The East Central University Alumni Association and Black Alumni Association (BAA) hosted the annual Alumni Gala Dinner and Dance event Homecoming weekend.

During the event, the 2026 Rising Star Awardees were honored alongside the recipients of the 2026 Donnie Nero Scholarship and the O.W. Lee Scholarship.

SEE **GALA,** Page 8

ECU's Joyce Kemboi earns second national Athlete of the Week honor

ADA, Okla. – East Central University sophomore Joyce Kemboi has continued a record-breaking season for the women's cross country team, earning two NCAA Division II Women's Athlete of the Week honors from the U.S. Track & Field and Cross Country Coaches Association (USTFCCCA).

Kemboi first earned the national honor after a dominant performance at the Chile Pepper Festival, hosted by the University of Arkansas, where she finished fifth overall with a time of 16:09.7. She broke her own ECU women's cross country 5K record and recorded the fastest 5K time in NCAA Division II this season by 14.1 seconds. Her performance also helped the Tigers finish fifth among 28 teams, making ECU the top Division II team in the field.

SEE **ATHLETE,** Page 12

Oka' Con celebrates 10 years of the Oka' Institute at East Central University

SEE **OKA**, Page 2

The 2026 Homecoming King and Queen announced at halftime against SWOSU

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Oka'

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ADA, Okla. – The Oka' Institute at East Central University (ECU) celebrated its 10th anniversary during the John and Kay Hargrave Water Sustainability Conference, known as Oka Con'26, on Oct. 15.

The conference brought together community leaders, researchers, tribal partners, policymakers and industry professionals to discuss water sustainability, land stewardship and solutions for Oklahoma's natural resource challenges.

Speakers included Gov. Chris Anoatubby and Kris Patton of the Chickasaw Nation; Jimmy Emmons, assistant chief of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service; U.S. Rep. Tom Cole; ECU President Wendell L. Godwin; and Rep. Carl Newton, a conservation and water advocate. Ada City Manager Tommy Eaton also provided opening remarks.

Conference sessions covered sustainable communities, conservation, water management technology, and legislative perspectives on water, land and infrastructure. The program also featured technical presentations, a research poster contest and a networking luncheon at the Chickasaw Business Center.

The celebration continued with evening entertainment at the Hallie Brown Ford Fine Arts Center. An immersive field research experience focused on land and water management was canceled due to weather.

The conference also marked 10 years of ECU's Water Resource Policy and Management (WRPM) master's degree program. As part of the anniversary, three graduates — Newakis Weber, Ahndria Ablett and Joseph Harris — received Honored Graduate awards recognizing their contributions to water resources and sustainability across southern Oklahoma.

Weber, an ECU Political Science graduate, serves as director of natural resources for the Chickasaw Nation. Ablett, an ECU Legal Studies graduate, is director of water resources for the Choctaw Nation. Harris, who previously worked as a water planner for the Oka' Institute, serves as the institute's associate director.

Together, the three graduates have contributed to water resource management, conservation and infrastructure initiatives throughout the region. The WRPM program has produced more than 80 graduates in its first decade.

"This milestone is an opportunity to reflect on the partnerships and progress that have defined the Oka' Institute over the last 10 years," Duane Smith, executive director of the Oka' Institute, said. "Oka Con continues to serve as a place where people from different backgrounds and disciplines come together to share ideas, build relationships, and work toward practical solutions for the future of Oklahoma's water and natural resources."

The Oka' Institute advances water sustainability through science-based solutions, education, research and community partnerships. Its work focuses on sustainable communities, land stewardship, water research and water planning.

For more photos, visit ecutigerpics.pixieset.com/okacon2026/



U.S. Representative for Oklahoma's 4th congressional district Tom Cole



Dr. Christine Pappas, Newakis Weber, Ahndria Ablett, and Joseph Harris

Oka'

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ECU Foundation honors legacy at Annual Meeting

The East Central University (ECU) Foundation held its Annual Meeting Oct. 27 in the Chickasaw Business and Conference Center (CBCC).



ECU Foundation board members and employees, along with ECU administration and local community members, gathered to discuss the current state and recent successes of the Foundation.

The 2026 meeting saw the official appointment of Scott Linn as the organization's next chief executive officer, succeeding President Emeritus John. R. Hargrave, who led the ECU Foundation since 2018.

To honor Hargrave's longstanding impact, the ECU Foundation Hall inside CBCC was renamed, the John R. Hargrave ECU Foundation Hall.

In his final act as CEO on stage, Hargrave had his Financial Advisor and ECU Foundation Board Member, Taylor Howard transfer some of his stocks to the ECU Foundation. What attendees initially thought was a skit turned into a surprise announcement when Hargrave revealed that the funds would be used to establish and endow the Buffy Lovelis Scholarship, honoring his longtime friend, coworker, and the Foundation's current Chief Operating Officer.



ECU bench dedication held Homecoming weekend in honor of the ECU Alumni Association Board of Directors.

“A Night on the World” celebrates benefits of global education

ADA, Okla. – The Global Education Program at East Central University (ECU) welcomed students, alumni and international university representatives for “A Night on the World: Transforming Lives with Global Education” on Tuesday, Oct. 13, in the Estep Multimedia Center inside the Bill S. Cole University Center.



Estep Auditorium was filled to capacity as attendees gathered to learn more about the Global Education Program and hear from current and former students who participated in international study opportunities, as well as representatives from ECU’s sister universities.

The event featured presentations from students and alumni who shared their experiences studying abroad through the program. Recent participants included Ava Bolin, who studied at Biberach University of Applied Sciences in Germany during spring 2026, and Carson Dill, ECU’s 2025 Brad Henry Scholar, who attended Swansea University in Wales, United Kingdom.

Additional student and alumni speakers included John Kelso, who studied in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 2026; Dylan Sterling, who studied for two semesters at the State University of Management in Russia in 2017; Jamie Cluck, who studied at the National University of Linguistics in Kiev, Ukraine, in 2013; and Wyas Parker and Mahate Parker, who studied in Ukraine and Russia in 2007 and 2005, respectively. Ben Godwin and Mark Feltz also shared their experiences studying in France.

In addition to former participants, representatives from several international universities attended the event. These included Prof. Thomas Beyerle of Biberach University of Applied Sciences in Biberach, Germany; Dr. Laurent Bourdier, director of the International Office at the University of Limoges in France; and Prof. Baxtiyor Gafurov and Ms. Olima Vokhidova of Bukhara State Medical Institute named after Abu Ali ibn Sina in Uzbekistan.

ECU alumni who previously participated in the university’s Global Education Program were also encouraged to attend and share their experiences with students interested in international study opportunities. For more information about the Global Education Program, contact Dr. Mara Sukholutskaya at msukholu@ecok.edu.



ECU professor Dr. Ken Hada performs new poetry collection at Book Talk

Dr. Ken Hada, professor for the Department of English and Languages, read from his newest poetry collection, “Nexus,” at a Book Talk inside the Linscheid Library, Oct. 28 in front of an engaged audience.

Hada serves as the founder and director of East Central University’s premier literary event, the Scissortail Creative Writing Festival. His work has been honored by the Oklahoma Center for the Book, the Western Writers of America, the National Western Heritage Museum, and the South Central Modern Language Association, and has been featured on “The Writer’s Almanac” and various national media outlets. Information about his work can be found at kenhada.org.

Olivia Hinkel held Artist Talk in ECU's Pogue Art Gallery



Olivia Hinkel presented an Artist Talk over her exhibit, "Roost," inside ECU's Pogue Art Gallery, Oct. 1.

Based in Indianapolis, Indiana, Hinkel is an interdisciplinary artist and maker whose work explores mortality, labor, ability and autonomy. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art and English from Hanover College in 2013 and a Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Studio Art from Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi in 2023.

Hinkel's work frequently examines the tension between the desire for self-sufficiency and an awareness of personal limitations. Drawing in part from her experiences as a woman living with chronic illness, she works across a variety of media to consider questions of independence, vulnerability and the limits of the body.

In Roost, Hinkel transformed the gallery through an immersive environment composed of more than 100 light boxes arranged to evoke the movement of starling murmurations. Researchers believe starlings murmurate in part as a visual invitation for other birds to gather and roost, allowing them to share resources and gain protection from predators.



The 72nd Annual Faculty Exhibit took place Oct. 27 inside the Pogue Art Gallery, featuring faculty from ECU's Art, Design, Media and Communication Department.

Dr. Cornel Pewedary speaks to students in NAS Program

Dr. Cornel Pewewardy gave two lectures at East Central University Oct. 29 to students from the Native American Studies Program. Pewewardy is an associate professor of Political Science at the University of Central Oklahoma, former Vice-Chairman of the Comanche Nation and an inductee into the 2024 Oklahoma Educators Hall of Fame.

The purpose of Dr. Pewewardy's lecture was to build upon how Kiowa, Comanche and Apache relationships to power, place and contested territories illuminate the ruptures between scientific and cultural rationality, which is the central pillar of his academic portfolio. DrPewewardy questions the relationship between Western social and psychological truths and provides an alternative way of conceptualizing power and place in Southwest Oklahoma.

Integrating Indigenous reality with Indigenous epistemologies, Pewewardy demands that leaders address the esoteric, the immaterial, non-tangible aspects of reality which comes to life in such concepts as mind, spirit, consciousness, belief, conviction, mental representation, dream, image, intuition, imagination, myth, symbolism and more.

Secondary Education Reframing OAS Seminar

The Department of Education hosted a seminar, Oct. 28, inside the Lanoy Education Building, for secondary education majors that reframed the Oklahoma Academic Standards.



The ECU Student Counseling Center hosted the annual Fresh Check, where students participated in a mental health check-in with interactive booth, prizes and food.

Fresh Check Day is a nationally recognized engaging and uplifting mental health promotion event for colleges that features peer-centered interactive booths, a festive social atmosphere, and exciting prizes and giveaways.

ECU Senior Day



Students had the opportunity to learn about a variety of opportunities at East Central University during sessions covering the ECU band and choir, campus organizations and Greek life, and the Tiger Esports program. Additional sessions highlighted the benefits of the ECU Honors Program, including tuition waivers, special housing options and international travel, as well as scholarship opportunities through the Inspire to Teach program for students pursuing education degrees.

A separate session for parents provided information on financial aid, completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and understanding university tuition bills.

ECU Majors Fair allows current and prospective students the chance to learn about the programs ECU has to offer









Service Day for Presidents Leadership Class and Honors Program







Over 60 East Central University students served the Ada community Oct. 17, picking up trash around town, alongside ECU President Wendell Godwin and Director of the ECU Honors Program Dr. Steve Benton.

Honors student Ricardo Charqueno organized the event.

Pie-A-Zeta, Bake Sale, Big Man on Campus and more organized by Zeta Tau Alpha for Think Pink Week









The "Spirit of Roary" arrives for Homecoming season!

2026 Alumni Gala Dinner and Dance



2026 ECU Rising Star Katie Cowger



2026 ECU Rising Star Trevor Sutton



2026 ECU Rising Star Anna Wood



Jaymi Evans, recipient of the Donnie Nero Scholarship



Trenton Wheeler, recipient of the Donnie Nero



Gabriel Bennett, recipient of the O.W. Lee Scholarship



Emmanuel Ajibike, recipient of the O.W. Lee Scholarship





First place winners for East Central University's 2026 Annual Alumni Golf Tournament, held at Oak Hills Golf & Country Club, (from left to right) Heath Stuckey, Jeff Schmidt, Samuel Malchar and Justin Graham.



The East Central University Fun Run/ Walk returned to kick off Homecoming morning



East Central University class of 1976 was celebrated at the annual Golden Tiger Brunch just hours before homecoming



Spirits on the Terrace brought students, employees and faculty together on the Chickasaw Business and Conference Center terrace to celebrate



The Spirit of Roary continued after the parade into an exciting Trunk-or-Treat outside the Kerr Activities Center



The East Central University Basketball team held another successful annual Pancake Breakfast during Homecoming morning





The Black Alumni Association brought communities together for their annual BAA Tailgate party


PRIDE OF TIGERLAND
EAST CENTRAL UNIVERSITY
ADA, OKLAHOMA


ECU




Main St
ECU SHOW
GHOSTBUST
THIS GHOST IS TOAST
AIN'T AFRAID OF A GHOST
WHO YA GONNA CALL?
TIGER


ECU TIGERS
ECU







Rikki Gandy of Wilson, Okla., representing the ECU Honors Student Association was named the 2026 Homecoming Queen while Elliot Riden of Ada, Okla., representing the ECU Honors Program was named the 2026 Homecoming King.



Jones Academy juniors and seniors attended a special Homecoming edition Tiger Preview Day, hosted by ECU Education Department's I-DREAM grant project team. Students spent the day touring campus, watching the Homecoming parade, enjoying brunch in Taff Cafeteria and attending the Tiger football game at Koi Ishto Stadium.



Black Alumni Association Black&Orange mixer closed out Homecoming night



Milam Award presented at halftime

Dr. Benny Bruton was named the recipient of the 2026 Milam Award at East Central University (ECU).

ECU Athletics honored Bruton at the 2026 Homecoming football game against Southwestern Oklahoma State University at Koi Ishto Stadium.

The Milam Award is presented annually by ECU to a former Tiger football player who not only excelled in the classroom and on the gridiron, but also distinguished themselves in their chosen career. The award is named in honor of Joe Milam, a former educator and coach for ECU.

Bruton attended ECU on an athletic scholarship, graduating with a bachelor's degree in Biology in 1974 before earning his master's degree in Plant Pathology/Phytopathology from Oklahoma State University (OSU) in 1977 and his doctoral degree in Plant Pathology/Phytopathology from Texas A&M in 1980.

For the next 32 years, Bruton served as a Ph.D. Research Scientist in the USDA Agricultural Research Service in Weslaco, Texas and Lane, Okla., where he developed methods to control soilborne diseases, wilts and vine declines of cucurbits: watermelon, cantaloupe, pumpkin, etc. He traveled extensively in Central America assisting farmers and governmental agencies in identifying and developing disease control measures.

During his 32 years as a research scientist with ARS, he published approximately 200 scientific papers which consisted of scientific journal articles, book chapters, etc.

Returning to his alma maters, Bruton would serve as adjunct instruct with OSU from 2005 to 2007 and ECU from 2007 to 2010 before his retirement.

Bruton passed away Jan. 15, 2023.

Accounting Career Night



The annual event allowed students the opportunity to connect with employers in the accounting profession.

Secondary Education open house

All Secondary Education majors or those interested in being secondary education majors were invited to an open house to learn about scholarship opportunities, advising tips and the benefits of becoming a teacher.

Student embrace Halloween with movie nights



The Office of Housing and Residence Life prepare for a screening of Scooby Doo inside Ataloa Theatre

Two Halloween themed movie night oppurtunities were provided to students in Oct., with Phi Kappa Tau presenting the film "Backrooms" inside the Phi Kappa Tau Lounge, located inside Pesagi during Homecomign week. The following Monday, ECU Housing and Residence Life hosted a Fright In Movie Night event inside Ataloa Theatre.

ATHLETE

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Joyce Kemboi participating in the 2026 Chile Pepper Festival

She later earned her second national Athlete of the Week honor after winning the Old Glory Gallop, hosted by Dallas Baptist University, with a time of 16:26.5. Kemboi finished 10.2 seconds ahead of the runner-up, helping ECU secure a second-place team finish, its best result at the event.

With the two awards, Kemboi became the first runner in ECU women's cross country history to earn multiple USTFCCCA National Athlete of the Week honors.

Her performances have helped establish her as one of the top distance runners in NCAA Division II while contributing to the Tigers' success throughout the season.

Two Tigers earn GAC Conference Player of the Week honors

East Central University senior wide receiver Kaden Jones and sophomore kicker Gabriel Ogura have been named the Great American Conference's Offensive and Special Teams Players of the Week, respectively, for Week 6 of the 2026 season.

The honors mark the first career GAC weekly awards for both Tigers, who played pivotal roles in ECU's thrilling road victory over Arkansas Tech University

Jones delivered a historic performance against the Wonder Boys, recording 289 receiving yards and three touchdowns. His receiving total established new single-game records for both East Central University and the Great American Conference.

Ogura proved equally instrumental in the high-scoring contest, converting all seven of his point-after attempts while connecting on three field goals.

ECU Showtime brings Babes in Toyland to life inside the Ataloa Theatre





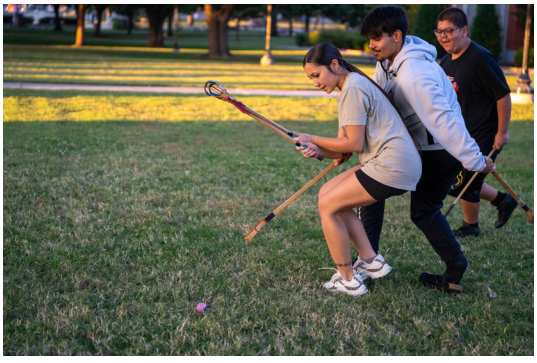
The musical is based on an original play by Glen MacDonough and is directed by Vickie Reifsnider with musical direction by Rudy Lupinski.





Stickball returns to the lawn for students and community, organized by the Native American Student Association







Feathers of Summer

PI: Jose Montalva
Biology student: Howl Farron

In March 2026, we were awarded a grant from the Oka' Institute to conduct a survey of native bees on the Ada property, located just south of Ada, Oklahoma, at the Byrds Mill area. This site has significant potential for future ecological research and field studies, providing opportunities to investigate native pollinators and broader patterns of biodiversity and ecosystem health.

Since we began our field research in March of this year, we quickly noticed the remarkable diversity of birds present on the property. One of the main reasons for this diversity is the unique vegetation structure known as the Cross Timbers, an ecological transition zone characterized by a mosaic of prairie, shrubland and woodland habitats.

This mixture of habitats creates a wide variety of resources and ecological niches for birds. And we are not talking only about the usual suspects (cardinals, blue jays, sparrows and other familiar species). There is much more to discover!

Oklahoma also plays an important role in bird migration. Just as millions of monarch butterflies pass through Oklahoma during their migration toward Mexico in the fall, many bird species use the state as part of their seasonal migration routes. Species that breed farther north may pass through Oklahoma during migration, while others travel from the tropics to spend the summer in the state.

This seasonal movement brings an incredible variety of colorful and distinctive birds to Oklahoma, including buntings, orioles, and tanagers. Even Oklahoma's state bird, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, is primarily a summer resident, arriving in spring to breed before migrating south in the fall.

As a result, the property is more than just a place with a high diversity of birds, it is a dynamic meeting point of different habitats, seasons, and migration routes, making it an excellent location for studying Oklahoma's avian diversity. So far, our field surveys have documented more than 100 bird species, highlighting the ecological value of the property. This remarkable diversity is especially important given the potential for future conservation efforts and long-term ecological research by the City of Ada and the Oka' Institute.







Water Programs at East Central University Celebrate 10 Years

By Dr. Christine Pappas

ADA, Okla. – Ada residents got a taste of water scarcity in June when a water main ruptured. Most people don't consider where their water comes from until they turn the tap and nothing comes out. However, water users in Ada can visualize the pipeline that brings water from Byrds Mill Spring by gravity to Ada. Further, they can visualize the shape of the Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer from which the spring flows. People in Ada are more aware of their water due to the work of the Oka' Institute and the Water Resource Policy and Management master of science degree at East Central University.

In 2016, visionary leaders, Chickasaw Governor Bill Anoatubby and ECU President John Hargrave, created an agenda for water in Ada that would affect Oklahoma for years to come. A community development study known as the Tadzo Report revealed Ada uniquely excelled in expertise in water and that economic development could be built upon. Ada is the home to the Robert S. Kerr Environmental Research Center, known locally as Kerr Lab, a groundwater research lab that was established even before the Environmental Protection Agency was formed. Ada receives water from Byrds Mill Spring, which flows from the historic Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer. Ada is the location of East Central University, which houses over 100 professors who can study various aspects of water and its use. Why wasn't Ada focusing on its water? Could water become a source of economic growth?

Understanding that water is the ultimate economic development issue, together Governor Anoatubby and President Hargrave developed two joint initiatives: create a water institute and create a master of science degree in Water Resource Policy and Management.

In a 2016 press release, then ECU President Hargrave said, "It seems everything just fell into place." Along with five years of financial support from the City of Ada and the Ada Jobs Foundation (now Grow Ada), the Sciences and Natural Resources Foundation sold land to the Ada Industrial Development Authority, which donated the money to the East Central University Foundation to begin the water institute. It is named for "oka," the Chickasaw and Choctaw word for water.

To create the masters degree in Water Resource Policy Management (WRPM), Provost Katricia Pierson worked with Dr. Christine Pappas to make a proposal for an interdisciplinary degree that combines law and policy, water scienceand Native American topics.



Oka' Institute Staff attending Water Fest on the ECU Campus

This unusual degree was approved by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education in September of 2016. There were seven students enrolled by the end of the first semester.

Pappas is the founding director of the WRPM master of science degree and she continues in this role. She is also the Coordinator of Policy and Education for the Oka' Institute. In the last 10 years, over 80 students have graduated from the WRPM and are employed all over the world as water planners, utility operators, teachers, grant administrators and other water-oriented careers. Three graduates have had a particularly important impact on Southeast Oklahoma. These graduates are Newakis Weber, Director of Natural Resources for the Chickasaw Nation, Ahndria Ablett, Director of Natural Resources for the Choctaw Nation, and Joseph Harris, Associate Director of the Oka' Institute. For more information, please visit www.ecok.edu/mswrpm.

The founding Executive Director of the Oka' Institute was Susan Paddack who concluded her service as a Senator in the Oklahoma State Legislature in 2016. While a Senator, Paddack successfully passed Senate Bill 288, a critical piece of legislation which protects the Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer from overuse. Several communities such as Ada and Tishomingo draw drinking water from this aquifer. A former science educator, Paddack knew that her job would include educating the public about water. She also focused on pulling together partners from regulatory and economic sectors. Dr. Guy Sewell, a veteran



Oka Institute staff at Ada City Council meeting



Oka' Institute Blue Thumb water quality training on Little Sandy creek

of both ECU and the EPA's Kerr Lab, was named Research Director.

Paddack created an Advisory Board of stakeholders who worked in water but who did not have a forum to talk and collaborate. The Oka' Institute also hosted the first Oka Sustainability Conference in its first year just months after it was founded. Staff from Kerr Lab has attended every Sustainability Conference and presented research at many of them.

Paddack led the Oka' Institute for five years. She focused on building relationships across the state and Chickasaw Nation as well as hosting educational forums and lectures. Landowner associations such as the Lake of the Arbuckles Watershed Association and the Blue River Foundation were supported. Paddack also signed a key five-year agreement between the Oka' Institute, the Chickasaw Nation, the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to promote watershed health through best land management practices.

Paddack retired from the Oka' Institute in 2021. Kristopher Patton, then Chickasaw Nation Director of Natural Resources, served as interim Director after Paddack's retirement. Patton was instrumental in securing an additional round of funding from the City of Ada and continuing to push the Oka' Institute further. He was especially visionary in seeking a path for communities in the Chickasaw Nation to connect with state and federal funding for water infrastructure development.

Duane Smith was named Director of the Oka' Institute in 2022. He brought over 40 years of experience in the water sector to the Oka Institute. Smith worked at the Oklahoma Water Resources Board from 1978 to 2010, the last 13 years as Director. In the private sector, Smith owned the consulting firm Duane Smith and Associates which worked closely with the Chickasaw Nation, the Choctaw Nation and the City of Ada.

As Director, Smith has pushed the Oka' Institute in new directions. Today the Oka' Institute has four main focus areas: Sustainable Communities, Research, Land Stewardship and Water Planning. Oka's mission is to promote the use of science-based best practices for sustainable water management. The Oka' Institute claims 30 employees among the four areas, including community specialists, scientists, geographic information system (GIS) specialists and policy experts.

Every dollar of investment in the Oka' Institute has created strong return on investment. The Communities program has used structured engagement to connect rural Oklahoma communities including Ada to over $100 million of state and federal infrastructure grants.

The Oka Research team is leading the Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer Phase II study which will spend $5 million over 8 years to provide water data that will lead to sustainable water use and planning. Researchers have embarked on multiple studies of wildlife habitat and ecosystem health.

The Land Stewardship team works with local landowners to promote soil health and best management practices. Leadership in area burn associations cuts red tape for landowners seeking to use the indigenous practice of prescribed burning on their land. Oka collaborated in developing the Juniper Evaluation Tool (JET) which uses GIS to identify how and where to remove harmful eastern red cedar trees.

Oka's Water Planning team creates and utilizes cutting edge research to inform water policy. Oka' staff use GIS data to plan for drought, flood, and fire. Oka' staff regularly publish their research and present at state and national conferences.