

THE
BIG
 PICTURE

Rural Community Colleges: Challenges, Context, and Commitment to Students

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Across the United States a divide is widening. Rural America, once a defining centerpiece of the nation, is diminishing as young people, talent, and economic prosperity gravitate to urban centers. For decades, community colleges in rural America have contended with the demographic shifts, labor market changes, and poverty that caused this divide. Then the COVID-19 pandemic — which disproportionately affected rural areas and their most marginalized populations — exacerbated the existing struggles and piled on a collection of new ones. Rural college leaders can overcome these challenges and find new opportunities, but only if they act boldly. To do so, these leaders must redefine their roles with a singular focus on addressing long-standing inequities and promoting the economic upward mobility of their students.

Rural College Leaders Must Reverse the Downward Trajectory

Rural communities are losing jobs. Between 2010 and 2016, urban areas captured 97 percent of all job growth, and more than 60 percent of the economic expansion that will happen through 2030 will occur within just 25 megacities. Rural America, moreover, is at risk of losing jobs to automation and structural declines in its core industries.

Rural America is also losing people. While rural high schools boast some of the nation's highest graduation rates, students from rural areas are less likely to go to college than their suburban and urban peers. Moreover, when rural students do attend college, they are likely to leave the area to do so —

The Rural Leader Learning Community

Today's challenges call for significant action — and for bold regional leadership — from rural community college leaders. The Rural Leader Learning Community (RLLC) is a cohort of rural community college leaders who engage in professional development opportunities and explore innovative solutions to concerns that are unique to the rural context.

The RLLC, established in late 2020, is a cross-functional group of 26 rural community college senior administrators from 25 states. It was created by the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement (NCII), with funding support by Ascendium Education Group.

This first-of-its-kind network established specific goals for the 2020–21 academic year. Chief among them was developing this series of briefs that explores how rural community colleges can best position themselves for long-term viability after the COVID-19 crisis. This brief — *The Big Picture* — provides context for the series so each of the other briefs can be tightly focused on its topic. The six briefs are:

- **Brief 1:** Creating a College-Going Mindset
- **Brief 2:** Acting Boldly to Build Financial Solvency
- **Brief 3:** Cultivating Partnerships to Support Students' Basic Needs
- **Brief 4:** Diversifying Faculty at Rural Colleges
- **Brief 5:** Redesigning Advising and Support Services
- **Brief 6:** Collaborating to Create Regional Economic Opportunity

and they are unlikely to return after completing their education. As a result, the people of rural America are becoming older; less educated; and more likely to be employed in low-skill, low-wage occupations.

If rural communities are to prosper — if they are to offer living-wage employment, provide the means for upward economic mobility, and address poverty — they must regain control over their talent pipelines. Without intervention, the growing demand for individuals with postsecondary credentials, along with the dearth of these individuals in rural communities, will serve to only exacerbate the long-standing economic disparities with urban areas.

Breaking the persistent cycle of poverty in rural communities requires attention and innovation across all sectors. It requires both nurturing talent and building the demand side of the economy. Rural college leaders are essential players in this work.

In areas that already have demonstrated, living-wage employment opportunities, college leaders can create stronger pathways and pipelines to develop the talent employers need. In areas that do not already have such employment needs, colleges can partner with employers to imagine and create new opportunities. For example, a growing number of rural colleges are helping residents develop ideas, launch new enterprises, and incubate emerging local businesses. This entrepreneurial activity will be an important ingredient in reversing the decline in their communities.

Rural Communities — and Their Colleges — Face Interrelated Challenges

Members of the Rural Leader Learning Community (RLLC) note that they cannot separate their colleges from their communities. They say, “We are the community’s college, and the success of the college is bound to the success of our community. We can’t improve the lives of our students without also playing a central role in promoting opportunity in our community.”

All community colleges nurture connections within their service areas and are proud of the deep ties they hold as well as the support they provide. For rural colleges, this role takes on greater urgency because there are far fewer community organizations that provide complementary support. In these cases, communities depend on their colleges to holistically meet community needs.

Colleges help their communities address challenges including the following:

Contending with demographic shifts. Population declines are threatening rural areas’ long-term vitality and prosperity. Among the 529 counties that lost population in each of the last two Census counts 88 percent were rural counties, showing a steady decline over 20 years. From 2010 to 2017, 995 nonmetro counties (counties that are not part of metropolitan areas) logged more deaths than births.

This overall trend has been masked to some degree by net migration patterns that boost rural populations in some areas and shrink them in others. Rural areas that have experienced a net increase in population include those that are adjacent to major cities; have the draw of natural beauty and amenities; or are centers of job-creating industries, such as the recent shale-oil boom. Conversely, out-migration in other rural areas accelerated as a result of the Great Recession a decade ago. These population declines have been very slow to recover, bucking historic trends that typically saw rural populations improve quickly after recessions.

In addition, the dramatic increase in dual and concurrent enrollment options does not always translate into higher enrollment after high school graduation. Colleges whose students

All the statistics cited come from publications produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) unless otherwise noted. These sources can be found in the resource section at the end of this brief.

follow this pattern can benefit from providing incentives that encourage dual and concurrent enrollment students to continue their studies after high school.

It is also notable that America's rural populations are becoming more diverse. While White people still account for 78 percent of the population in rural areas (compared to 57 percent in urban areas), growth in Hispanic and Native American populations in nonmetro areas has offset decreases in White and Black residents in these communities. Time will tell if these trends endure, but rural areas likely will continue to diversify, much like the rest of the country. Thus, rural America's future will depend on communities' ability to create inclusive environments in which people of color feel welcome.

Adjusting to changes in the labor market. Nonmetro economies are not a monolith, and counter to stereotypes, they are not all supported primarily by farming. According to USDA ERS data, 69 percent of all counties that depend on manufacturing are rural. And rural labor markets are complex, with 585 rural counties not having a single predominate economic driver.

That said, agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and recreation have been the core components of the rural economy over the past several decades. Yet these industries and the types of jobs they offer are changing. For example, while the agribusiness sector continues to be a substantial source of employment, mechanization and consolidation have dramatically changed the industry, and only a small percentage of these workers are farmers.

Similar dynamics in the U.S. manufacturing sector — driven by globalization, market forces, and automation — have had a substantial impact on rural communities. From 2001 to 2015, rural employment in manufacturing subsectors as diverse as textiles, computer and electronic equipment, wood products, and plastics have all declined more than 20 percent. Metro areas have experienced similar decreases, but the impact has been more intense in rural communities because the declines typically affect a greater share of the population.

Many rural communities have been decimated by the closing of a sizable manufacturing operation that had been one of the largest, if not the largest, employer in the area. For example, for decades, much of rural America in the sparsely populated west and the upper Appalachia regions has been supported economically by the coal industry. This industry continues to be in a steep decline as renewable energy booms and as technology helps make other conventional energy more and more affordable.

This type of change and the trend toward automation will continue in manufacturing, agriculture, and other industries. Millions of jobs could be phased out as different ones are created, but the new jobs will require more education and higher skills.

According to a 2019 report from the McKinsey Global Institute on the future of work, rural communities will be disproportionately affected as automation becomes more pronounced. The report estimates that of the 512 counties that will experience the most displacement of jobs due to automation, 429 are rural.

People without a postsecondary credential are four times more likely to have jobs that can be lost to automation, compared to those with postsecondary credentials. The report also emphasizes that retraining workers and providing lifelong learning will be key to mitigating the disruption.

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Boosting low postsecondary education enrollment and attainment. One of the persistent problems facing rural communities is the comparatively low percentage of individuals pursuing education beyond high school. The previous section emphasizes the growing economic premium for attaining a postsecondary credential, yet this message either has not reached or has not motivated enough rural students to enroll in college.

Overall, rural students graduate high school at rates higher than the national average. A 2018 *Atlantic* article indicated that 87 percent of all rural students graduate high school compared to a national average of 83 percent. These numbers are promising, but disparities also lie beneath the surface. The Rural School and Community Trust found that only 77 percent of non-White rural students graduate from high school, which is well below the national average. Acknowledging these racial imbalances, the promising aggregate outcomes among rural high school students do not translate into college enrollments.

The National Student Clearinghouse's annual *High School Benchmark* report monitors the progress of student cohorts after they graduate high school. In the most recent report, only 60 percent of rural students enrolled in college in the fall immediately following high school graduation. Comparatively, 61 percent urban students and 67 percent of suburban students enrolled directly after high school. The gap in college enrollment between rural students and their urban and suburban counterparts expands for students who choose to wait a year or two after graduating high school.

Encouragingly, recent years have seen a growing percentage of rural students who enroll in college immediately after high school, but the rural/urban/suburban gap continues. The longer-term deficit in college-going behavior among rural high school graduates has contributed to a sizable gap in postsecondary educational attainment between rural and urban communities. According to 2019 Census data, 30 percent of rural residents 25 years and older have at least an associate degree compared with 43 percent of those in urban areas. This 13-percentage-point attainment disparity represents a substantial challenge for rural communities as they strive to develop the talent their communities need to be successful in the 21st century economy.

Even when they improve college-going rates, rural areas face an additional — and possibly an intractable — problem: the out-migration of college-bound rural students. These individuals leave their communities to attend college, secure post-college employment in metro areas, and never return. This brain drain phenomenon is difficult to trace, but it is also a long-standing issue for rural communities. Moreover, the recent economic downturn and the shifts in rural labor markets described previously have made this issue more acute.

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Managing through gaps in critical community infrastructure and services. Rural communities have experienced long-standing challenges in addressing the infrastructure and service needs of their residents. Rural residents contend with shortcomings in physical infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and dams; critical services, such as health care facilities and mental health providers; and access to broadband internet. While all of these needs are important, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the lack of broadband.

According to the Pew Research Center, as many as 40 million rural households may lack broadband internet. Rural residents are more than 12 percent less likely than their urban counterparts to have reliable broadband internet, and those that do are paying substantially more for these services.

In the modern internet-based economy, the lack of broadband can incapacitate families and businesses that are struggling to get by. When the COVID-19 pandemic led to remote work and school, many people in rural areas were forced to find alternatives. Encouragingly, this issue has not gone unnoticed by policymakers. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 34 states adopted legislation in 2020 to address gaps in broadband in rural areas. The federal government has also stepped up efforts to deal with this issue. While these developments are promising, improvements will take time to implement, and gaps inevitably will remain.

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Renewed Focus on Rural Community Colleges

The interconnected challenges outlined in the previous section are long-standing issues that have developed over time. The COVID-19 pandemic made many of these problems worse, and solving them will require sustained effort and attention. Encouragingly, rural colleges and the communities they serve are enjoying renewed attention from the federal government, major philanthropic organizations, and the news media. This focus stems in part from the growing political divide between urban and rural areas as well as the desire to address the growing alienation of rural residents from their urban and suburban peers.

The two major national community college organizations — the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) — have also recently elevated the challenges of rural colleges and communities. AACC’s convening of the Commission on Small and Rural Colleges has made these institutions an organizational priority. ACCT, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, recently published a report entitled *Strengthening Rural Community Colleges: Innovation and Opportunities*.

About the RLLC

The RLLC is a cohort of rural community college leaders who engage in professional development opportunities and explore innovative solutions to concerns that are unique to the rural context. Members focus on identifying strategies and models of innovation that rural colleges can use to restructure their institutions in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. As always, the ultimate goal is to improve connections with students and support their educational experience from the initial point of interest to completion and beyond. These briefs are the main product of the RLLC’s first year of work.

SELECTION OF THE RLLC MEMBERS

To identify members of the RLLC, NCII solicited nominations from several national partner organizations, including the Community College Research Center, the Aspen Institute's Postsecondary Leadership team, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, and the Student Success Center network. Because NCII aimed to have the small group be broadly representative of the rural community college sector, membership selection considered a number of factors. It was important to include individuals that held a variety of positions on campus, people of color and from other marginalized populations, and people who would be active contributors to the dialogue. Institutional location and context were also considered in the selection process.

According to ACCT's recent report on rural community colleges, federal agencies use more than a dozen different definitions to characterize rural areas. These definitions use a range of elements such as geographic location, population density, and socioeconomic status to articulate what constitutes a rural community or county. For example, the Census definition of rural essentially is *any area that is not urban*. In the context of community colleges (and other higher education institutions), the U.S. Department of Education uses the location of the main campus to determine the degree of urbanicity. This definition is problematic for community colleges because it does not consider branch campuses. The U.S. Department of Education's approach also fails to consider the broader service area of colleges, which can be quite large for rural colleges. As noted previously, NCII used a combination of these definitions to identify the membership of the RLLC. Given the lack of a single clear definition, crosswalking the different classifications is important to gain a deeper understanding and eliminate bias of any one approach when studying the issues of rural colleges and their communities.

Once the 26 members of the RLLC were identified, NCII conducted a deeper analysis of the colleges' service areas to get a fuller understanding of the college communities. The 26 colleges serve more than 100 counties with varying demographics and contexts. A college might serve a single county, have more than 20 counties in its service area, or have a service area that is more than 17,000 square miles.

NCII also assessed the counties using the Economic Innovation Group's recently released revision to the Distressed Communities Index (DCI). The DCI uses seven metrics — percentage of adults without a high school diploma, poverty rate, percentage of adults not working, housing vacancy rate, median household income, change in employment, and change in establishments — to place communities into five tiers. Overall, 53 percent of the counties served by RLLC members are in the lower three DCI tiers (distressed, at risk, and mid-tier). This finding may underestimate the challenge because the DCI is based on five-year Census estimates that cover the period 2014–18. It does not reflect the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected rural areas.

“Rural colleges and the communities they serve are enjoying renewed attention from the federal government, major philanthropic organizations, and the news media.”

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES for the Rural Community College Leader Series

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