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 BRIEF

Creating a College-Going Mindset

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In most rural areas, a large percentage of individuals do not consider college to be a realistic option. As college leaders, it is our job to encourage a strong college-going mindset throughout our service areas — and to work with our faculty and staff to find creative ways to reach students who will not come find us. Meeting this goal likely will require some changes, and the most important one might be to stop asking, “Are our students ready for college?” and start asking, “Is our college ready for students?” And then we need to design a college structure and programs that meet our students where they are.

Understanding the Students We Never Meet

Every community college is challenged to foster success for students who choose to enroll, and improving retention and completion rates are priority objectives. In fact, enhancing retention is typically considered a best practice for increasing overall enrollment and graduation rates, which lead to growth in tuition revenue and outcomes funding.

But what about the individuals who elect not to pursue postsecondary education? Do they not present opportunities for enhancing the workforce and economic development in the communities we serve? Are they not a great source of untapped potential for lifting our enrollment numbers? All too often community colleges fail to engage potential students who seem outside their reach, particularly first-generation students who might think college is for other people.

If we look at the challenges our current students face, we can learn more about why others do not even try to attend college. We all have students who need academic support, face financial challenges, or struggle to balance school and work. Many deal with food insecurities, lack of transportation, or the inability to afford suitable child care. And many, particularly in rural populations, lack current technology or internet connectivity.

About the Rural College Leaders Series

Across the United States, a divide is widening. Many rural areas are losing population and job opportunities as economic expansion becomes concentrated in urban areas. Community colleges, already experiencing declining enrollment across the country, face even greater challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet challenges also bring opportunities for change. Innovative rural community colleges are finding new ways to rethink their structure; update their programming; and better engage students, employers, and communities.

This series of briefs, told from the perspective of rural college leaders, shows how colleges aim to regain control of their regions’ talent pipelines, serve as engines of economic improvement, and thus provide opportunities for both individual upward mobility and regional stability.

The series includes:

- **The Big Picture**
- **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**

COVID-19 exacerbated these long-standing concerns. Unemployment and reduced work have devastated some families. People became sick and lost loved ones. And while all of these challenges are relevant to many community college students, they may create the largest barrier for the students we never see — the ones who could become first-generation students but do not even take the first step toward higher education.

Building Connections — and Positive Mindsets About College

Colleges have compounding problems that lead to lower enrollment and lost opportunity.

First, some students cannot imagine themselves in college. Second, colleges do not know how to connect with those who may benefit from higher education but do not have positive attitudes about our colleges.

We all spend time, energy, and money on student recruitment. Often, however, these recruitment efforts are passive. We cast the proverbial large nets through high school visits, letters, email, marketing, and social media. And then we hope students will apply and enroll.

But standard recruitment tactics have little impact on those who believe college is not for them. It is time to extend our “student-first orientation” beyond the students who decide to enroll — and to make sure it reaches the potential students who do not envision themselves in college.

If we want to recruit the students who currently feel disconnected from our colleges, we must be more intentional, provocative, and forward thinking. We must employ new methods of engagement. Below are examples of how our colleges are approaching this critical work.

Cleveland State Shows Students That They Are College Ready

Cleveland State Community College (TN) supports a five-county service area that is predominantly rural. It has a variety of programs that introduce young people to college and help them see how they belong in college — and how college can support them.

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THE EQUITY IMPERATIVE

Wherever U.S. rural colleges are located, they share the conviction that they exist in large part to build communities, interrupt persistent poverty cycles, and promote the economic upward mobility of their students. Today, community colleges across the country are renewing their focus on equity and how it intersects with this mission of providing opportunity. Efforts related to improving diversity, equity, and inclusion have a variety of motivators, including a commitment to social justice, pressure from students, and the pragmatism of ensuring a sound future workforce. Whatever their origins, these efforts are as important in rural America as they are in urban areas.

Inequities have been built into our educational systems for decades. For example, while four-year graduation rates at rural high schools outpace the national average, rural students of color graduate at rates lower than the national average. Moreover, historical inequities persist across American health, employment, and justice systems.

Rural colleges may be serving populations that include first-generation students, low-income students, students of color, adults re-entering higher education, gender nonconforming students, and others. While each community is different, every college has current and potential students who face barriers that other students do not. To stay true to its mission, each college must acknowledge and purposefully work to break down these barriers and close opportunity gaps.

START EARLY AND CONNECT OFTEN

Cleveland State's College is for Me program brings 5th, 8th, and 11th graders to the college's campus. The students take tours, meet college students, and attend classes that are designed for them. Students from all 11 school districts in Cleveland State's service area participate in the program, and each year, the college hosts 300–400 students for each age group. College is for Me starts young students on the path toward college, and it has become a favorite event for the college community.

BE THE GO-TO PLACE FOR JOBS

Cleveland State's partnership with The Refuge, a local community development organization, helps us reach unemployed people and those who are financially disadvantaged. The Refuge offers a series of classes that prepares participants to be successful in the workplace. Many of those who complete this program at The Refuge then enroll in Cleveland State's Basic Welding certificate program, which typically leads to employment with life-changing wages.

With this two-step process as a model, Cleveland State used federal stimulus funds to establish its own Quick Job Recovery Bootcamps. The bootcamps are a series of free, six-week training programs that prepare participants for jobs. We offer programs in HVAC, MIG Welding, Microsoft Office, and Phlebotomy. So far, more than 100 people have completed the bootcamps. We intend to expand the program as more funding becomes available.

DO NOT WAIT FOR STUDENTS TO COME TO YOU

Reliable transportation is critical for students when they consider going to college, and rural communities often lack frequent or far-reaching public transportation. To address this issue, Cleveland State started a shuttle service from Decatur, TN (an area lacking public transportation) to both its main campus and its satellite campuses. We suspended the program during the pandemic but plan to bring it back with additional routes that include some of the region's most rural areas.

In addition, we plan to take our college to where our rural citizens live. We hope to launch a series of programs in schools, churches, and meeting places throughout our service area. In this way, we aim to engage participants in free, nonthreatening activities that help them to learn more about our college and our people. These events could be followed with free continuing education classes.

By turning the tables and going to where rural citizens live, we hope to start breaking down the barriers that keep us disconnected. We must remember that we helped build those barriers. Maybe, if we make a genuine and consistent effort to develop meaningful relationships, potential students will find that our college will welcome them and offer more than they ever realized.

Wallace State Partners With Families and the Community

Wallace State Community College (AL) is located in rural Cullman County. The region faces challenges in increasing its high school attainment rates but has more associate degrees per capita than any other county in Alabama. Wallace State reimagined the ways in which we serve students along the continuum of their lifecycle, beginning at birth and continuing throughout their careers.

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LIFECYCLE ENGAGEMENT

Community colleges should be inspirational and aspirational settings, where all students can envision a better life for themselves through the postsecondary experience. But we cannot assume that every high school student has been introduced to or encouraged to consider attending college because rural high schools may not have the resources for a full-time counselor.

Community colleges, therefore, must be proactive in showing rural students and their parents the opportunities they can find at college. Wallace State begins developing relationships with parents and potential students at birth. We continue this process throughout the student's primary and secondary education.

- * Parents of every newborn at our local hospital receive a Lion Bank (like a piggy bank, but in honor of our mascot) to encourage parents to begin saving for college.
- * We provide coloring books to elementary school children to introduce them to Wallace State and opportunities for future careers.
- * We host an annual Let's Pretend Hospital to introduce 1st graders to careers in medical fields while also teaching them life-saving techniques such as stop, drop, and roll during a fire.
- * We begin career explorations with 5th and 6th graders by introducing them to hands-on stimuli, such as exploring a helicopter or an ambulance, manipulating radiology equipment or a dental probe, programming a robot, or climbing onto a farm tractor.
- * We introduce middle and high school students to work-based education through job shadowing, pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships, and summer bootcamps.

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Discussion Questions

- * To what degree does our college accept the belief that college is not for everyone? How do we counter that narrative?
- * Does our college focus more on asking, “Are our students ready for college?” or “Is our college ready for students?”
- * Can we intentionally raise students’ aspirations and help them imagine themselves in local occupations that are different from their lived experiences?
- * How might we engage with rural students and their parents throughout students’ early lives and education?
- * How can our programs and services be better aligned to reflect the needs of rural America — and of our region in particular?
- * In what ways has the pandemic created larger gaps between our college and current or potential students?

FOR RESOURCES RELATED TO THIS BRIEF, PLEASE SEE [THE BIG PICTURE](#).