



Cultivating Partnerships to Support Students' Basic Needs

Joe Schaffer
 President, Laramie County Community College (WY)

Travis Blume
 Vice President of Student Services, Bay de Noc Community College (MI)

People living in rural America face a range of challenges that discourage beginning college and make dropping out more likely. They tend to have lower incomes, less access to health care, and fewer role models for college success than their urban and suburban peers. They likely have long commutes to educational opportunities, have few options for public transportation, and lack the technological infrastructure to participate in college or training virtually. Fortunately, rural communities also have deep, interwoven social networks that bond people to one another and to place. Community colleges are uniquely positioned to tap into these networks and build a fabric of holistic supports for their students.

Challenges Related to Wages, Housing, and Child Care

DECLINING WAGES AND HIGHER POVERTY

Rural populations tend to be employed in low-skill, low-wage occupations. Moreover, many rural-based industries, such as manufacturing and energy/natural resources, offer a generally decreasing prospect for a livable wage without a postsecondary education. In fact, job and wage growth have been nearly nonexistent in rural areas of the United States over the past decade.

As a result, poverty rates in rural areas are greater than those of urban or metro areas. Individuals in rural areas also are more likely to fall into poverty and stay impoverished for longer durations than their urban counterparts. Single-parent families living in rural areas are even more likely to experience longer episodes of poverty, and for those without a four-year degree, breaking the cycle of poverty is harder in rural areas than in urban ones.

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

INCREASED FOOD INSECURITY AND DEPENDENCE ON SOCIAL SUPPORTS

Not surprisingly, individuals living in rural areas, especially those classified as the lowest-income rural areas, are far more likely to be dependent on social services than their counterparts in higher-income rural communities and urban areas. For example, in the lowest-income rural counties in the nation, more than 40 percent of families receive benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and nearly 60 percent of children in the lowest-income rural counties are covered under public health insurance. In addition, rural communities contain 87 percent of counties with the highest food insecurity.

HIGHER COSTS FOR LOWER-QUALITY HOUSING

Housing also presents challenges in rural communities. Whether they rent or own, rural families either require assistance or spend a disproportionately larger share of their income on this basic necessity than those in more urban areas. And while home ownership is generally higher in rural areas, a larger portion of rural homes are substandard. For example, 21 percent of all occupied housing units in America are located in small and rural communities, yet 30 percent of the nation's housing units that lack hot and cold piped water are in rural areas. Homes on tribal lands are more than 10 times more likely to lack basic plumbing than the national average.

CHILD CARE DESERTS

More than 60 percent of rural families live in child care deserts, where there is a complete absence of providers. When rural child care is available, demand is high. For every opening, at least three families are seeking a spot. Rural families also pay a larger portion of their income for care than those in urban areas.

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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.

Examples of Colleges Supporting Students' Basic Needs

Rural colleges that aim to better serve students — and enroll more students — are actively addressing the challenges of poverty. They are partnering with community organizations to provide services, lessen the financial burden on individuals, and mitigate the complexities of meeting basic needs so students can better focus on school. For example:

- * **Bay de Noc Community College (MI)** has established comprehensive campus food pantries, which were made possible through partnerships in the community. Bay College receives donations to help support the food pantries from area service organizations and community foundations. The college also has developed a partnership with a local grocery store to receive food items that are nearing expiration.
- * In Maine, America's most rural state, the **Maine Community College System** has developed a scholarship program to help students with the cost of child care. This scholarship, available to both credit and noncredit students, assists students with child care costs while they attend classes. This program was expanded with funds from gaming revenue in the state.
- * At **Amarillo College (TX)**, the No Excuses Poverty Initiative focuses on removing barriers that hinder students' educational pursuits. The college surveyed students about what they saw as barriers and used the data to create the initiative, which includes an on-campus food pantry, child care assistance, a clothing closet, assistance with applying for community benefits, and free Thanksgiving meals for students.

Challenges Related to Health, Health Care, and Transportation

HEALTH CARE ACCESS AND COSTS

Disparities in health and well-being between rural and urban populations are well documented. People in rural areas have substantially higher incidents of disease and disability, lower life expectancy, higher mortality rates, and generally higher rates of chronic pain than their counterparts in urban areas.

These disparities became painfully evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as rural areas witnessed significantly higher rates of COVID-19 infections and higher death rates. Mental health issues associated with isolation and depression, combined with the growing opioid epidemic, are making matters worse.

Access to health care, and especially mental health services, is substantially lower in rural communities. It is estimated that more than 60 percent of rural Americans live in areas with shortages of mental health professionals, and most psychologists and social workers reside in metropolitan areas. For most rural communities, primary care physicians provide mental health support, and law enforcement responds to mental health emergencies.

Even for those rural residents that can access health services, far too many lack any meaningful way of affording it. Most rural residents do not have employer-provided health insurance, and even with the Affordable Care Act, they have less access to robust plans from the insurance marketplace. If they are poor and qualify for Medicaid, there are fewer providers who accept it in rural communities than in metropolitan areas.

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TRANSPORTATION AND EDUCATION DESERTS

Rural America has been called “a small town with incredibly long streets.” Distance is a way of life for rural residents — distance to health care, support services, critical needs, and amenities. Education is no different. Approximately one in five Americans live in education deserts, where a postsecondary institution is more than 25 miles away, and more than 80 percent of Americans in education deserts live in rural areas. At best, these individuals may have access to a single institution, typically a community college. At worst, the distance they cover to get to any educational institution is prohibitive.

Because of low population density, public transit is nearly nonexistent in rural communities. Thus, individuals must rely on their own vehicles to get them from point A to point B. Moreover, the roadways and bridges they must navigate often are in disrepair.

Solutions Related to Health Care and Transportation

Innovative community colleges are developing creative partnerships that improve access to health care and provide transportation to their campuses. For example:

- * **Somerset Community College (KY)** is working with its regional hospital to have a mobile health clinic on campus each week. Students can visit the on-site mobile clinic to be seen by health professionals or arrange for telehealth visits.
- * **Clark State College (OH)** has implemented several efforts to improve students’ mental health. The college provided training about trauma-informed practices for its employees. The college also has on-campus self-care spaces with massage chairs, music, and conversation areas. And its learning management system now has a virtual self-care space, which is a safe space for conversations related to a variety of support and interest areas.
- * At **Davidson Community College (NC)**, students can get free car maintenance and small repairs through the college’s automotive courses. The college also partnered with a local agency to help students with car repair bills.
- * **Virginia Highlands Community College (VA)** and **Nashville State Community College (TN)** partnered with local public transportation to allow their students to ride for free. This service makes traveling to and from class, getting to work, and managing all the aspects of life that require transportation easier for students.

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Activity and Discussion Questions

The following activity and discussion questions can help rural colleges identify and create partnerships with a goal of recruiting and retaining students.

ACTIVITY: ASSESSING CURRENT PRACTICES

Colleges teams will review existing practices and partnerships to (a) determine if current efforts are strengthening students' financial stability; and (b) identify gaps in services, systems, and support structures. Specifically, stakeholders should identify areas in which more effective systems or structures will help more students overcome barriers so they can enroll in college, persist, and ultimately complete a college credential. Colleges can download this [Student Financial Stability Scale of Adoption Assessment](#), developed by NCII, as a template for this activity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- * How can we best understand the needs of our students and the barriers they face? What methods of data collection could our institution use to learn more from our students (surveys, focus groups, etc.)?
- * What inequalities exist among our students? Which students struggle to access supports?
- * What community resources can our college access? How can we open communication with local community resources to explore partnerships? How can we foster and support ongoing partnerships?
- * How can our college implement holistic supports in a way that would create the most impact on persistence, retention, and degree completion? Should these supports be located on campus, be located in the community, or be virtual?
- * What resources would our college need to implement a more holistic support model? Are there community partnerships and/or funding opportunities to help support the implementation or growth of holistic supports?
- * What types of employee training and development do we need so employees not only are aware of resources but also are able to assist students in using them?

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