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BRIEF

# Collaborating to Create Regional Economic Opportunity

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**Partnerships between community colleges and K-12, higher education, and employers are the key to improving economic mobility for our students. Every community college should be the engine of economic opportunity in its region, but colleges cannot do this work alone. Community college leaders must play a more active role in bringing stakeholders together with the explicit goal of improving economic mobility. The demand for rural college leaders' time is greater than ever, but we cannot neglect this part of our jobs. The best way to serve our students is to act not only as college leaders, but also as community leaders.**

## Rethink Partnerships as Relationships to Drive Economic Opportunity

When thinking about work with K-12, higher education, and employers, our overarching focus should be on relationships that expand economic opportunity and growth. In *The Future of Work in America*, the McKinsey Global Institute concludes that "the decade ahead could be a rocky one for rural America. Low-growth and rural areas as a group account for 20 percent of jobs today but could drive as little as 3 percent of job growth through 2030."

This projection is concerning. To truly serve our students, we must build relationships through which we can improve their prospects for economic mobility. That means working with key stakeholders including employers, community organizations, K-12 schools, and other higher education institutions. Through these partnerships, colleges can:

- \* Develop the talent regional employers need.
- \* Lead conversations that imagine and then create new avenues of opportunity in their region.

## 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**

- ★ Engage students who would not otherwise enroll in college, including first-generation students; students of color; and foster, homeless, and adjudicated youth — and engage them starting early in their lives.
- ★ Help students who have unskilled or semi-skilled jobs follow career pathways that align skill development with careers in high-demand, high-wage occupations.
- ★ Develop certificate and degree programs that include workforce credit and stacked credentials. These approaches allow students to work while learning and have currency in the workplace.

## Build Strong, Lasting Relationships

Strong relationships have long-term benefit for all parties — a benefit in which all parties have a stake and work for a greater good. In a strong relationship, all parties understand each other's needs and are actively working toward common goals. Developing and maintaining these relationships takes hard work, but even in the fast-paced, never-ending, pulled-in-all-directions days of rural community college leaders, the hard work is worthwhile. While everyone at a college can develop these relationships — faculty members, for example, can work with the employers that ultimately will hire their students — college presidents must drive this work. In addition to having more opportunities to form connections, college presidents can model partnership building for others on campus.

Like hard work, the importance of good communication cannot be underestimated. Good communication does not happen with occasional emails, newsletters, social media interactions, or small talk at gatherings. Good communication is intentional, focused, and ongoing. It starts with listening to identify mutual goals, and it evolves as the parties develop and then implement strategies to meet those goals. While community college leaders are inundated with communications needs, dedicating the time and energy to communicate effectively with our partners is important so we can establish, grow, and cement meaningful relationships.

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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.

## **Relationships Expand Access in Arkansas**

In July 2015, Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchison joined co-chairs at the **University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville (UACCB)**, **Lyon College**, and the **Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce** on the campus of UACCB to kick off development of the Impact Independence (Independence County, AR) community strategic plan. The event was attended by all area school districts, employers, and the community. Over the course of a year, the plan developed into four broad focus areas: economic prosperity, tourism, educational excellence, and healthy living and well-being.

The educational excellence focus area included a call to provide more opportunity for high school students to earn concurrent credit (often referred to as dual credit) at UACCB or Lyon College. As it happens, UACCB was already working with seven local school districts on such an effort. Since 2013, we had been offering concurrent credit, with discounted tuition, to students in those seven districts.

Three models had emerged to cover the cost of the discounted tuition: (1) The student pays the entire cost; (2) the school district pays the entire cost; and (3) the student and school district share the cost at various amounts based on the student's free or reduced-price lunch status.

Early in the process, we noted that one of the districts that required students to pay the cost of tuition had 38 students enrolled in a particular semester. Of those 38 students, none was eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This finding helped identify a significant equity issue: When the cost of tuition was left to students, lower-income students were not participating. A review of data from districts using one of the two other payment models showed a more consistent distribution of participation among students at various income levels.

Led by the Independence County Education Foundation (created as part of the Impact plan), the community established an Independence Promise program to fund the cost of concurrent tuition for students. The strong relationships between all the partners in the community resulted in a fund-raising effort that received pledges of nearly \$250,000.

Knowing a sustainable funding source was necessary, the partners began working with local state legislators, and within one year, the governor had signed into law the Arkansas Concurrent Challenge Scholarship, which provides for excess state lottery funds to be used to award each high school junior and senior in the state up to \$500 per year for concurrent course tuition. (Institutions of higher education are required to provide at least a 50 percent discount to concurrent students.)

Although more than a dozen organizations were involved, the strong relationships among the partners — built over the course of five years — were central to this success. A community initiative led to a state law that expanded access to college for high school students, thereby opening the door to more job opportunities and paving the way for economic mobility.

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## Carl Albert Partnerships Expand Recruitment and Raise Funds

At **Carl Albert State College (OK)**, we continually strive to forge new partnerships with community members to address the growing diversity and equity gaps in our service area. Severe economic declines have led to increased poverty rates, high unemployment, decreased accessibility/mobility, and greater needs related to housing and food insecurity.

These factors forced us to re-examine our strategic planning and re-evaluate our roles as educators for the people we serve. Our new identity includes multiple facets of community leadership, ranging from workforce development to strengthening the educational pipeline from K-12 to college completion.

We established working relationships with several entities through consistent communication and strategic planning, and these efforts led to considerable victories for all parties. Campus space that was shut off due to inactivity and cost-savings measures is now being leased by multiple community agencies, including the local Workforce Development Office, numerous tribal service outreach entities, the Pervasive Parenting Center (a federal service agency that works with students with disabilities), and a state-funded daycare/Head Start program.

The positive effects of this relationship building are immeasurable. We have tremendous activity on our campus where we once had voids left from draconian budget cuts and enrollment challenges. In addition, our campus has become the centralized hub of activity in our service area, and we have found many ways to collaborate with our new tenant-partners.

For example, college experts from enrollment management cultivated relationships with each of the agencies to expand recruitment markets and job placement opportunities. And specialists from student affairs partnered with our tenant-partners to offer enriched programming for our student body, faculty, and staff.

Moreover, we have generated revenue from what was previously empty space while our tenant-partners have saved operating costs through our discounted pricing. While the work has been demanding, the benefits have been transformational.

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### Discussion Questions

- ★ Is there a clear community/regional vision for economic mobility and opportunity? If so, what partner leads this work?
- ★ How should existing partnerships evolve to be more productive economic engines for the community?
- ★ What should the college's role be in defining or advancing this shared community vision?
- ★ What is the current status of our relationships with key partners in our service area?
- ★ What other relationships might we cultivate? What problems do we hope to address through these partnerships?
- ★ Who on our campus will take the lead in building these relationships? What roles should the president and cabinet members play in this work?

**FOR RESOURCES RELATED TO THIS BRIEF, PLEASE SEE THE BIG PICTURE.**