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 BRIEF

Redesigning Advising and Support Services

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Students and potential students in rural America face hardships that differ from those of their suburban and urban counterparts. Thus, their needs for advising and wraparound services may require different kinds of effort or creativity from their colleges. That said, it is incumbent on colleges to find ways to help their students, and they can do so with intentionally designed, career-focused advising and support systems. With such systems — which should be purposefully integrated into the student experience — advisors, faculty, and support staff can have ongoing conversations with students about their personal growth, their academic and career goals, and the support they need to attain the outcomes they seek.

Building on What We Learned Navigating the Pandemic

Rural colleges must provide a full suite of support services to a geographically dispersed population that is unlikely to have access to public transportation and affordable, reliable high-speed internet. The colleges themselves also may lack the technology supports and personnel that are more common at their larger, suburban, and urban counterparts. In addition, rural colleges must help students — who often have to travel long distances to attend college — build a deeper sense of connection and belonging as well as the bonds that can help form a safety net for success.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated all of these concerns. People living in rural America were hit hard by the pandemic, and it changed the lives of those enrolled in community colleges. Many potential graduates were forced to drop out or stop out. Those who were able to stick with their studies had to navigate a wholly virtual environment with limited support and technology.

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

Colleges used a variety of virtual learning, communication, engagement, and academic support tools to help students during this time. This virtual learning experience changed not only how students have become accustomed to learning but also their expectations for post-pandemic advising and support.

The pandemic provided an opportunity for community colleges to evolve advising and support services to align with virtual learning and to better serve students living in rural communities. Students who found the means to continue their community college education will require intentional advising and support services to continue advancing toward their academic and career goals. Prospective students may need new ways to connect to the institution so they can attend college despite the many barriers — including work, child care, and transportation — that stand in their way.

To build on what we learned during the pandemic, community colleges should redesign virtual advising and support structures to guide students from connection to completion and ultimately to career attainment. Specifically, advising should be:

- * **Career focused** so it helps students navigate norms that do not always support higher education.
- * **Proactive** so students feel connected; do not have to take the lead in asking for support; and have help navigating work demands, family responsibilities, and financial barriers.
- * **Technology mediated** so advising and support are more accessible and so students and advisors can build relationships over time.
- * **Continuous throughout the student experience** so advising changes from an enrollment-focused transaction to a relational approach that fully supports students as they pursue their educational and career goals.

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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.

Developing Frameworks for Advising and Support

Because rural institutions have fewer resources — faculty and staff, technology, and actual dollars — they can benefit from developing a shared responsibility framework. Colleges must leverage all possible resources, including individuals and community partners, to regularly identify and address student needs.

For example, **Stanly Community College (NC)** created a model that helps all students establish at least one trusted relationship on campus. The college uses a cadre of professional advisors, remote advising, and a scaled early alert system to support students. Individual faculty and staff members adapt to circumstances and take action — such as finding available WiFi spots for students who need them — to set students up for success.

In terms of advising, rural students need the same supports as their suburban and urban peers. But rural colleges may have to find creative ways to provide the supports. It is easiest to understand and implement advising in the context of a framework. Colleges can use two frameworks to look at advising from two critical perspectives: (1) the Completion by Design loss-momentum framework, which emphasizes the student experience and helps colleges focus on the essential student perspective; and (2) the guided pathways framework, which details specific actions colleges can take to improve services to and outcomes for students.

In the following paragraphs, we use the loss-momentum framework — connection, entry, progress, and completion — to show how colleges can use career-focused advising to help students advance their goals at every step of their college experience. Colleges also can use the guided pathways frame to help each student develop an academic-career pathway that intentionally fosters engagement, maintains career focus, and provides academic and nonacademic supports.

Connection. Colleges can help students explore careers, salaries, and academic requirements to open their minds to careers beyond those experienced regionally. Many rural students have not been exposed to a broad range of careers, so they are not well positioned to make informed decisions about their academic and career goals. Giving students support for career exploration will help them see the big picture and understand how an academic-career plan will guide them through a college pathway to employment. Students' academic-career plans should include a financial plan and timeline to minimize their time to degree completion and employment.

Entry. Colleges can redesign orientation and other activities to use smartphone apps, social media, and other technology-based approaches to connect students with faculty, staff, and peers. Personal connections — including those created and sustained virtually — help students build relationships and strengthen their sense of belonging before classes begin. Advisors also should be proactive about communicating during the entry phase of enrollment.

Progress. Faculty, advisors, support staff, and students should have access to systems that allow them to monitor students' progress through their pathways, and both advisors and faculty should have a comprehensive understanding of student support services including mental health, community services, tutoring, and so on.

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Advisors should continue to engage students in career-focused conversations, check in to make sure they are progressing in their academic-career plans, and see if they need support to meet their basic needs. Colleges should use early alert systems to identify students who are not on track and identify social services or other needs. They then should connect students to relevant resources and follow up regularly.

Completion. The structure for the completion phase should connect students with career and transfer staff. Colleges can use technology tools such as e-journals, career maps, job search strategies, and links to employer or transfer institution websites to help students with job placement or four-year college transfer. To facilitate these efforts, colleges can strengthen and expand their relationships with transfer institutions and employer partners to support students' next steps. A final area of focus would be setting up an expectation for ongoing relationships with graduating students. When colleges keep in touch with their graduates, they can get feedback on how the college experience prepared students for their next steps and explore ongoing connections, such as mentorship-type opportunities for future students.

Using a career-focused advising and support services framework can transform support for rural students. A collaborative advising process enhances student learning, fosters in-depth communications, supports reflective and collaborative planning, and increases engagement. Examples of college advising systems include:

- * **Warren County Community College (NJ)** built its advising strategy around the college's shift to a focus on student accountability and motivation. Warren wanted to move away from the outdated mindset of "We are the educators, we know what you need, and please take this test to prove you are college ready." Instead, the college adopted a new paradigm: "Welcome to college. You have the skills to succeed. We are here for you so please tell us what you need." The college moved toward a more personalized approach that offers all of the traditional and more customized supports throughout students' experience at the college, without being overly prescriptive.
- * **Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College (NC)** supports all students with a goal of transfer through its Transfer Advising Center. Transfer-seeking students also participate in a College Transfer Success course, which includes career exploration and choosing a pathway of study within the transfer degree program. Students also are assigned a discipline-specific, full-time faculty advisor.
- * **Walla Walla Community College (WA)** revamped its advising process, making advising mandatory for all degree/certificate-seeking students every term, regardless of enrollment status. Students cannot proceed with registration until they have met with an advisor. All advising sessions include a review of the student's academic pathway and discussions about financial planning.

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Discussion Questions

- * What resources does our college need to offer customized, intensive academic and career coaching?
- * Are we using advising to raise our students' aspirations? How can our faculty and staff better facilitate and support students' academic and personal growth?
- * Do our students feel welcomed and engaged?
- * How can our faculty and support staff better navigate students toward their academic and career goals?
- * Are we asking students about their interests, skills, and motivations — and listening to their answers? Are we integrating what we hear in our advising?
- * What social service resources do our students need? What percentage of students who need them are connected to them?
- * How can we better leverage technology to engage our students and minimize their travel time?

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