RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXCELLENCE:

A GUIDE TO DELIVERING STRONG OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS AND COMMUNITIES

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COLLEGE
EXCELLENCE
PROGRAM
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The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program supports colleges and universities in their quest to achieve a higher standard of excellence, delivering credentials that unlock life-changing careers and strengthen our economy, society, and democracy.

We know it takes visionary college leaders to achieve this higher standard, and we make it our mission to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and research-backed tools to inspire change, shift practice, and advance the capacity of colleges to deliver excellent and equitable student outcomes.

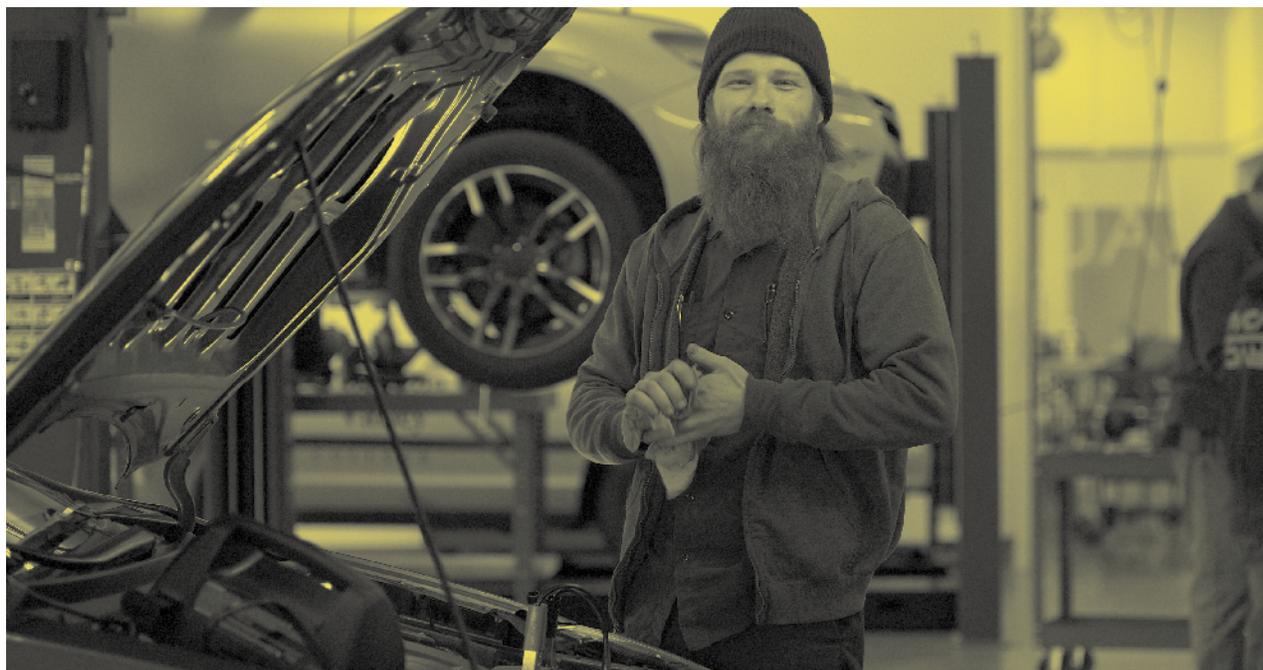Since our founding in 2010, we have used data to elevate excellence in practice; conducted extensive research to deeply understand what improves student success and equity; equipped the field with tools and guidance to replicate what works; and developed diverse, transformational leaders advancing student success.

Cover Photo

Patrick & Henry Community College | Martinsville, Virginia

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Introduction

Rural community colleges occupy a unique and important place in higher education. Of 332 million Americans, 46 million live in rural communities, and more than 1.5 million attend one of 444 rural community colleges. These institutions are more than education providers; they are essential hubs in their regions, generating opportunities for economic mobility, driving talent development, and often supporting their region's health and education systems.[1]

Successful rural colleges understand and lean into their unique strengths, including a deep connection to place and the strong relationships among faculty, staff, and students that often accompany small size. Leaders at great rural colleges describe an internal agility that allows people at their institutions to think creatively about how to solve challenges, often by creating regional connections: between new employers and members of the community who need jobs, between social service agencies and people in need, between K-12 and higher education. These accomplishments often happen notwithstanding substantial resource constraints: Nationally, rural community colleges receive fewer financial resources than other, often larger, community colleges.[2]

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[1] For further discussion of the essential roles of community colleges, see, Koricich, Andrew, Vanessa Sansone, Alisa Hicklin Fryar, Cecilia Orphan, and Kevin McClure. n.d. "Introducing Our Nation's Rural-Serving Postsecondary Institutions Moving toward Greater Visibility and Appreciation." Accessed November 9, 2022. https://assets.website-files. com/5fd3cd8b31d72c5133b17425/61f49f1f91e41a6effe3006f_ARRC_Introducing%20Our%20Nation%E2%80%99s%20 Rural-Serving%20Postsecondary%20Institutions_Jan2022.pdf.

[2] Ibid.

But while excellent rural community colleges offer many examples—and lessons—on how to improve student success and strengthen communities, they tend to receive less attention than their urban and suburban counterparts from policymakers, industry leaders, the media, and researchers. One consequence: less information about how excellence in student outcomes can be achieved for students in similar contexts. For this reason, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program (Aspen), supported by a grant from Ascendium, has developed this guide to share examples from high-achieving rural colleges that, we hope, can help other community colleges deliver stronger and more equitable results for the students and communities they serve.

The guide draws from several sources: data analyses of student outcomes, interviews with college leaders, virtual site visits to high-performing rural colleges, in-person site visits to rural colleges as part of the Aspen Prize process, and convenings of leaders of rural colleges.[3] Guiding our research is Aspen's framework for student success: strong learning and completion while in college; success in transfer and employment after college; and equitable access and success for students of color and students from lower-income backgrounds.

We are inspired by the examples of community colleges in this guide, and we hope other rural colleges will use them to ensure that more of our nation's diverse rural residents enjoy fulfilling careers and develop their talents in ways that strengthen rural communities and economies.

Northwest Iowa Community College | *Sheldon, Iowa*

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[3] An explanation of the research methodology is at the end of the report, on page 35.

Strengths and Challenges

To contextualize the strategies excellent rural colleges use to advance student success, we begin this guide with a brief summary of the (often unique) strengths of and challenges within rural communities and community colleges.

Common Strengths

Often, the conversation about rural communities and their colleges focuses on deficits, with too little attention paid to their strengths and assets. Excellent rural community colleges and their leaders understand and build strategies around these strengths to expand opportunities for economic mobility and to develop regional talent.

1. Economic Opportunity

Rural communities and their colleges benefit from varied economic bases that include legacy and emerging industries. While the economic drivers in rural areas differ significantly across the country, they generally fall into three categories. First are industries that relate to the large amount of available open space: most notably agriculture, tourism/recreation (such as ski towns or areas around national parks), and energy and mineral production.[4] Second are essential services, including jobs related to public safety, teaching, accounting, and (especially in areas with a regional hospital) health care. Third, community colleges in rural areas often sit at the forefront of new and evolving industries, including advanced manufacturing, which often replaces legacy, traditional manufacturing industries.[5] Excellent colleges strategically generate opportunity for graduates in each of these three areas.

2. Demographic Diversity

As is the case throughout the United States, rural communities are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. More than 30 percent of students at rural-serving public two-year colleges nationally are people of color, with the number of Hispanic students growing fastest.[6] In many rural communities, in-migration by people of color is resulting in overall population growth.[7] From 2016 to 2018, roughly half of rural counties grew in population, and some rural areas in every state have seen population growth.[8]

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[4] Kerlin, Mike, Neil O'Farrell, Rachel Riley, and Rachel Schaff. "Rural Economic Development Strategies for Local Leaders." McKinsey & Company. March 30, 2022. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/rural-rising-economic-development-strategies-for-americas-heartland.

[5] "Rural-Grown, Local-Owned Manufacturing." Aspen Institute. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/rural-manufacturing/

[6] Koricich, Sansone, Fryar, Orphan, and McClure, "Introducing our Nation's Rural-Serving Postsecondary Institutions"; Hillman, Nicholas, Jared Colston, Joshua Bach-Hanson, and Audrey Peek. 2021. "Mapping Rural Colleges and Their Communities." https://mappingruralcolleges.wisc.edu/documents/sstar_mapping_rural_colleges_2021.pdf.

[7] Pohl, Kelly. 2017. "Minority Populations Driving County Growth in the Rural West." Headwaters Economics. August 1, 2017. https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/minority-populations-driving-county-growth/.

[8] "A Few Things to Know about Rural America." Aspen Institute. 2020. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/A-Few-Things-To-Know-CSG-Brief-Update.pdf.

While college leaders interviewed for this guide often cited political challenges associated with changing demographics, they viewed the influx of immigrants and diverse populations as a net positive: an opportunity for their colleges to enroll and educate new residents, to provide them paths to family-sustaining jobs, and to help develop talent needed by their communities.

3. Community Standing

Rural community colleges are often among the most important institutions in their communities, serving not only as educators but as major regional employers, conveners, and economic development engines.[9] As a result, rural community college leaders are often very influential community members, serving as a recruiters of prospective new industries and developers of regional partnerships. Often these partnerships are with other educational institutions: universities where rural college students transfer and K-12 systems from which students enroll, including through dual enrollment programs. Because of the importance of these regional connections, rural college leaders have an outsized opportunity to combine resources in ways that strengthen not just their colleges but other institutions in the community, which can make the community more attractive to new industries and residents.[10]

4. Community Resilience

Leaders of excellent rural community colleges often cited the resilient, innovative, and adaptive spirit in their communities, which, at their colleges, translates into a pervasive desire to improve outcomes for both students and, more broadly, residents of their communities. Many rural communities have weathered changing economic conditions, public health crises, and population declines. As this research demonstrates, excellent rural community colleges have achieved success for students despite having fewer and more dispersed resources than most urban colleges. Through employer, university, and other community partnerships, as well as creative human capital strategies, these colleges strategically utilize the resources of their communities to advance their missions.

Northwest Iowa Community College | *Sheldon, Iowa*

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9   Miller, Michael T., and Daniel B. Kissinger. 2007. Connecting Rural Community Colleges to Their Communities." New Directions for Community Colleges 2007 (137): 27–34. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.267; Ajilore, Olugbenga and Caius Z. Willingham, "Adversity and Assets: Identifying Rural Opportunities." Center for American Progress. October 17, 2019. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/adversity-assets-identifying-rural-opportunities/.

10 Peters, D.J. 2019, "Community Resiliency in Declining Small Towns: Impact of Population Loss on Quality of Life over 20 Years." Rural Sociology, 84: 635-668. https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12261; Ajilore and Willingham, "Adversity and Assets: Identifying Rural Opportunities."
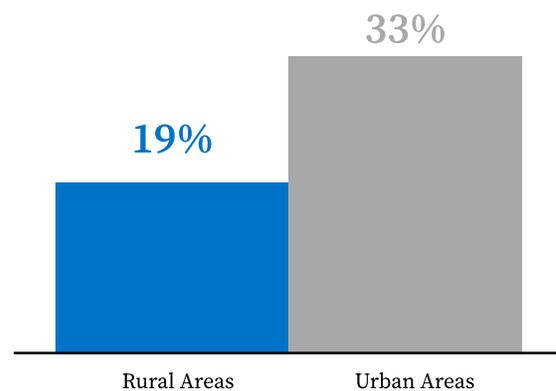
Challenges

In addition to maximizing their strengths, leaders of excellent rural community colleges understand the challenges their colleges and communities face and use that knowledge to develop strategies to overcome them.

1. Limited Educational Opportunity

In rural communities, fewer adults hold a bachelor's degree than in urban communities: 19 percent, compared to 33 percent.[11] Part of the reason: Rural communities tend to have fewer nearby postsecondary institutions and are more likely to rely on a community college as the entry point to higher education.[12] With fewer university partners nearby, it's harder for community college students to transfer and attain a bachelor's degree. And because many good jobs require a bachelor's degree, limited access to four-year colleges and universities translates into limited economic opportunity for many rural residents.[13] On the other end of the education system, rural K-12 schools are often under-resourced and spread over a large geographical area, making collaboration on dual enrollment and college preparation more difficult.[14]

Finally, with relatively few employers nearby, community college students can struggle to access internships and other work-based learning opportunities that can help them apply classroom learning. In response, leaders of exceptional rural community colleges profiled in this report have developed innovative partnerships and program delivery methods to ensure that students have access to comprehensive educational pathways with other educational institutions and employers.

**Percent of Population
with Bachelor's Degree or Higher**

33%

19%

Rural Areas   Urban Areas

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[11] "A Few Things to Know about Rural America." Aspen Institute. 2020. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/A-Few-Things-To-Know-CSG-Brief-Update.pdf.

[12] "Unequal and Uneven: The Geography of Higher Education." Jain Family Institute. December 2019. Accessed November 10, 2022. https://hef.jfiresearch.org/geography-of-higher-education/.

[13] Carnevale, Anthony, Jeff Strohl, Neil Ridley, and Artem Gulish. 2018. "Three Educational Pathways to Good Jobs." https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/3ways-FR.pdf.

[14] Gutierrez, David. "Little School on the Prairie: The Overlooked Plight of Rural Education." The Institute of Politics at Harvard University. https://iop.harvard.edu/get-involved/harvard-political-review/little-school-prairie-overlooked-plight-rural-education

2. Geography-Driven Enrollment Challenges

Recruiting students is harder in less densely populated areas. With many prospective students at a greater distance from campus, securing enrollment requires greater effort by recruiters and advisors of rural community colleges. While about half of rural areas have seen some population growth in recent years, other non-metro areas have lost population since 2010, and birth rate declines suggest this trend will continue.[15] But the challenge goes beyond smaller potential applicant pools. Prospective students in rural service areas—where college degree attainment rates are low—are less likely to know someone with a college degree, someone who can inspire them or guide them through the college application process.[16] Additionally, many rural areas lack critical infrastructure for students to access information, including reliable broadband internet and public transportation.[17] Excellent rural community colleges respond by directly filling these community resource gaps where they can: building the needed infrastructure or bringing education to where students are.

3. Skepticism About Higher Education

In rural communities where manufacturing, energy, and agriculture jobs were once prevalent, many residents once earned good wages without a college degree. Many interviewed for this report noted that, in their communities, the idea that a college education is unnecessary lingers, despite the changing economy.[18] Another challenge is the recent political narrative questioning the value of higher education.[19] Some rural community college leaders interviewed for this guide believe that as politicians have increasingly voiced concerns about higher education, this view has had an outsized impact on student recruitment in their relatively conservative communities.[20]

Skepticism about the value of community college also likely comes from the calculations by prospective students about the opportunity cost associated with enrolling. Multiple factors contribute to these calculations: First, prospective rural community college students may not believe they can afford to lose wages to come to college and complete a credential. Because a higher proportion of people in rural

[15] Cromartie, John. "Rural Areas Show Overall Population Decline and Shifting Regional Patterns of Population Change" Economic Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture. September 5, 2017. https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2017/september/rural-areas-show-overall-population-decline-and-shifting-regional-patterns-of-population-change/

[16] S. Sowl, "View of a Systematic Review of Research on Rural College Access since 2000." 2021. https://journals.library.msstate.edu/index.php/ruraled/article/view/1239/921; Pappano, Laura. 2017. "Colleges Discover the Rural Student." The New York Times, January 31, 2017, sec. Education. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/education/edlife/colleges-discover-rural-student.html.

[17] Rush-Marlowe, Rachel. "Strengthening Rural Community Colleges." Association of Community College Trustees. 2022. https://www.acct.org/files/ACCT8169%20%28Strengthening%20Rural%20Community%20Colleges%20Update%29.pdf; Hillman, Colston, Bach-Hanson, and Peek, "Mapping Rural Colleges and Their Communities."

[18] Carnevale, Strohl, Ridley, and Gulish, "Three Educational Pathways to Good Jobs."

[19] Parker, Kim. "The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education." Pew Research Center. August 2019. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/08/19/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education-2/

[20] Keily, Tom and Meghan McCann. "Perceptions of Postsecondary Education and Training in Rural Areas." Education Commission of the States. June 2021. https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Perceptions-of-Postsecondary-Education-and-Training-in-Rural-Areas.pdf

areas live in poverty (over 14 percent, compared to 11 percent in metropolitan areas), the pull to choose employment over higher education may affect a higher proportion of potential students in rural communities.[21] Second, completing a credential of value is far from certain. Most community college starters (60 percent) do not earn any credential in six years, and outcomes for students of color are lower.[22] Finally, outcomes for those who do complete may discourage some prospective students. According to the

Imperial Valley College | *Imperial, California*

Community College Research Center (CCRC), only about a quarter (23 percent) of associate degree graduates and a little more than a third (37 percent) of occupational certificate holders completed programs associated with earnings of at least $35,000 two years after completion.[23]

Rural colleges included in this guide strive to deliver better results, to improve completion rates, and partner with employers and K-12 schools to build efficient pathways that result in good jobs or efficient transfer to a four-year university. They then strategically tout those results to overcome skepticism and enroll more students.

4. Constrained Resources

The higher rate of poverty in rural communities means many students struggle to afford tuition and other costs associated with attaining a degree, such as transportation, childcare, and textbooks. Rural community colleges tend to have fewer resources available to fill those gaps. They have, on average, fewer students than other community colleges (about 2,500 versus a national average of over 8,000) and receive thousands less in total revenue per student than the average for all institutions.[24] Particularly in rural communities with declining populations and relatively low salaries, social service providers have access to less tax revenue, compounding the effects of poverty.[25]

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[21] Shrider, Emily, Melissa Kollar, Frances Chen, and Jessica Semega. "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2020 Current Population Reports." U.S. Census Bureau. September 2021. https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.pdf.; https://journals.library.msstate.edu/index.php/ruraled/article/view/1239/921

[22] Community College Research Center analysis of data from the National Student Clearinghouse's Completing College 2020, https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Completions_Report_2020.pdf

[23] Fink, John and Davis Jenkins. "How Much Are Community College Graduates Earning Two Years Later?" Community College Research Center. January 13, 2022. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/how-much-are-community-college-graduates-earning.html; Carnevale, Anthony, Jeff Strohl, Ban Cheah, and Neil Ridley. "Good Jobs that Pay Without a BA." Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. 2017. https://goodjobsdata.org/wp-content/uploads/Good-Jobs-wo-BA-final.pdf.

[24] Hillman, Colston, Bach-Hanson, and Peek, "Mapping Rural Colleges and Their Communities"; McClure, Kevin, Cecilia Orphan, Alisa Hicklin Fryar, and Andrew Koricich. "Strengthening Rural Anchor Institutions: Federal Policy Solutions for Rural Public Colleges and the Communities They Serve." Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges. January 2021. Page 8. https://assets.website-files.com/5fd3cd8b31d72c5133b17425/600f69daa492f04dedc7f691_ARRC_Strengthening%20Rural%20Anchor%20Institutions_Full%20Report.pdf

[25] Ajilore and Willingham, "Adversity and Assets."

Rural communities also generally have fewer regional actors with substantial assets with which community colleges can partner to advance student success, such as large employers, philanthropies, and sizable nonprofit organizations. Finally, due largely to their remote locations, rural colleges face relatively high costs for some services.[26] This means rural colleges have less funding for support services, equipment for technical programs, and personnel critical to advancing student success. To overcome funding limitations, strong community colleges work creatively to identify and build mutually beneficial partnerships with employers, universities, and other organizations that can contribute resources to advance student success.

5. Faculty and Staff Hiring and Retention

Rural community colleges often have challenges recruiting and retaining staff and faculty. Many community colleges researched for this guide cited particular challenges hiring for positions that require technical skills in high demand, such as faculty and staff with information technology or institutional research expertise. As noted earlier, part of the challenge is that rural colleges don't have equal financial resources to compete with other colleges for essential personnel. Another factor: Rural college leaders we interviewed reported hesitancy among candidates to move to a rural area unless they have a prior connection to the place. Finally, limited housing availability—either because of rising costs in rural communities with tourist attractions or low supply—makes faculty and staff recruitment even more difficult. These recruitment challenges mean rural community colleges must devise creative solutions, such as building housing for faculty and staff, sharing services with other community colleges, and combining roles in ways that increase efficiency and effectiveness.

Catawba Valley Community College | *Hickory, North Carolina*

[26] Rush-Marlowe, Rachel. "Strengthening Rural Community Colleges." In areas with fewer community resources, rural colleges have both higher student services and instructional costs. They often provide more basic needs directly to students, like transportation support and internet access, and without nearby hands-on learning opportunities provided by industry, rural colleges must invest in expensive, high-tech equipment like medical simulation dummies to ensure student learning when there is no neighboring partner hospital for nursing students.

Four Approaches to Promote Rural College Success

In this report, we identify these four approaches that enable excellent rural community colleges to capitalize on the strengths and overcome the challenges outlined in the previous section.

1. **Create Pathways to Economic Mobility**

2. **Convince Students to Enroll and Stay in College**

3. **Build Strategic Partnerships to Resource Student Success**

4. **Utilize Small Size as a Strength**

To enable these approaches to work, the rural community colleges profiled in this publication are all guided by a strong set of student success reform priorities. Presidents of these colleges put forth a specific, actionable reform agenda rooted in a deep understanding of their community and aimed at improving the success of students, advancing their economic mobility, and developing talent in the region. With that reform agenda in place, the colleges and leaders profiled in this guide used the following four approaches to overcome doubts about higher education, attract new resources, and deliver credentials that strengthen the lives of rural students and their communities.

1. Create Pathways to Economic Mobility

In a survey conducted by the Education Commission of the States, only half of rural respondents said they believed additional education would advance their career, and only 40 percent saw enrolling in higher education as a means to secure a stable job in times of economic uncertainty.[27] Data show that this perception is inaccurate: Compared to rural residents with only a high school diploma, bachelor's degree holders in rural communities earn nearly $15,000 more a year, and rural residents with some college or an associate degree earn an additional $4,000 annually.[28]

Despite these facts, the perception that higher education is not worth the investment creates enrollment and student success challenges. Leaders of exceptional colleges understand that building trust with potential students and community members starts with delivering programs with strong outcomes. They work to understand their regional labor markets and ensure that programs of study align with real opportunity, whether that means graduating directly into a good job or transferring and attaining a bachelor's degree that leads to a good job.

Excellent rural colleges also make the value of strong programs clear to students. They incorporate hands-on learning that helps students see the value of their education while they are in college, increasing the chances they will persist to graduation. They communicate that value to prospective students and to others in the community who influence them—including friends or family members who might otherwise encourage prospective students to forgo college for a job.[29]

Make Connections Between Programs and Existing Workforce Needs

Part of delivering valuable credentials starts with an understanding of where the best workforce opportunities are (and are not). Leaders of excellent community colleges do this through a combination of data analysis on workforce trends and conversations with employers about future workforce needs.

At **Lake Area Technical College** in Watertown, South Dakota, senior leaders and program directors regularly conduct such analyses. New programs are approved by senior leaders only if there is enough labor market demand for graduates to secure good jobs. Sometimes, leaders must make the hard decision to turn down potential partners if the payoff isn't there for students. For example, when the college was approached by livestock farmers in need of large-animal veterinary technicians, the college declined to establish a program because labor market data revealed that too few jobs with strong wages would be available to graduates.

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[27] Keily and McCann, "Perceptions of Postsecondary Education and Training in Rural Areas."

[28] "Rural Education." Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. April 23, 2021. https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/employment-education/rural-education

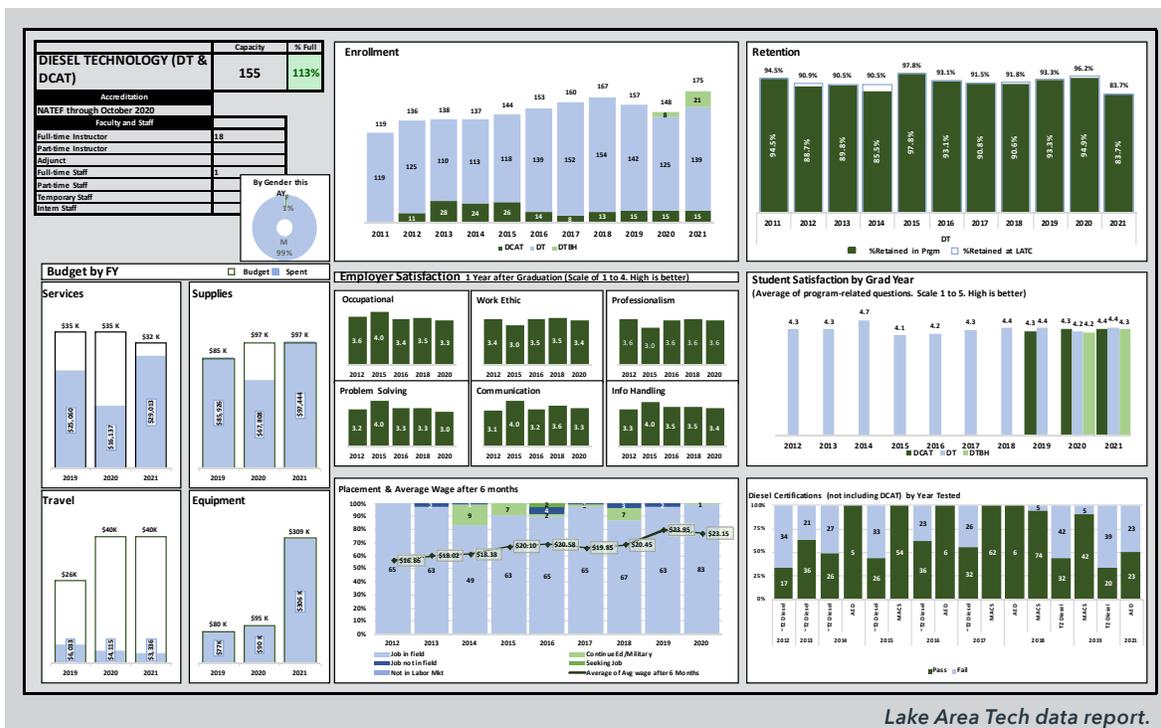[29] Schaidle, Allen. "Does Being Rural Matter? The Economic & Social Concerns of Rural Graduates," The Evolllution. April 8, 2020. https://evolllution.com/revenue-streams/extending_lifelong_learning/does-being-rural-matter-the-economic-social-concerns-of-rural-graduates/; Carr, Patrick J, and Maria Kefalas. 2011. Hollowing out the Middle the Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America. Boston, Mass. Beacon Press.

In contrast, when data suggested a dramatic need for more nurses and diesel technicians in their region, Lake Area leaders seized the opportunity. The college partnered with a healthcare provider to build the Prairie Lakes Healthcare Center of Learning for their nursing students (complete with a classrooms, medical labs, and a state-of-the-art simulation lab). The partnership enabled the college to hire more faculty, support remote learning sites, and cover costs associated with more clinical hours. These strategic investments paid off: The college saw a 28 percent increase in program enrollment over five years, and the students who graduate from these programs go on to provide much-needed health care in the region.

In the field of diesel technology, market demand pushed college leaders to work within funding constraints to expand their program by 7 percent between 2018 and 2022. Recognizing that this level of growth will still not meet growing demand, college leaders are in discussion with an industry leader to substantially expand training, using the nursing partnership as a model.

In both programs, Lake Area struggled to hire faculty away from industries that offered better salaries, a challenge that has increased due to recent worker shortages. So, the college received state support to increase faculty salaries, which are now competitive with industry. Lake Area leaders believe they secured those resources partly because of the college's track record of developing and implementing clear plans to meet specific labor market needs.

Once programs are built, Lake Area conducts a rigorous annual program review process to ensure that every program continues to deliver value. Every year, program leaders assess data on employer satisfaction, student satisfaction, graduation rates, wages of college graduates, and other information (see an example one page data report below). These data reports keep program leaders attuned to changes in the labor markets so they can continue to deliver strong outcomes and make adjustments when weaknesses emerge.

Lake Area Tech data report.

Envision a Larger Service Area to Expand Opportunity

Many rural community colleges find there are simply not enough good jobs in their region for graduates. Strong leaders look further afield, drawing concentric circles that extend beyond their traditional service area, looking for unmet labor market needs that can provide opportunities for graduates.

Such an analysis led leaders at **Walla Walla Community College** in southeastern Washington to expand its nursing program. The regional nursing shortage was clear from communications with the local hospital, but an economic analysis showed a large shortage across the entire state. Leaders saw an opportunity to help solve that problem and serve their students. Walla Walla developed a plan to dramatically expand its output of nurses and made a strong case for investment by the state, resulting in millions of state dollars for facilities and equipment. The end result: a tripling of graduates from the nursing program and closure of a critical talent gap.

Combine Workforce and Transfer Pathways to Meet Regional Needs

Invariably, analysis of a rural community's labor market reveals the need for more workers with both workforce credentials and bachelor's degrees. Seeing that, leaders of strong rural colleges work to not just strengthen workforce programs but also pathways to bachelor's degrees that align with in-demand jobs and long-term career opportunities.
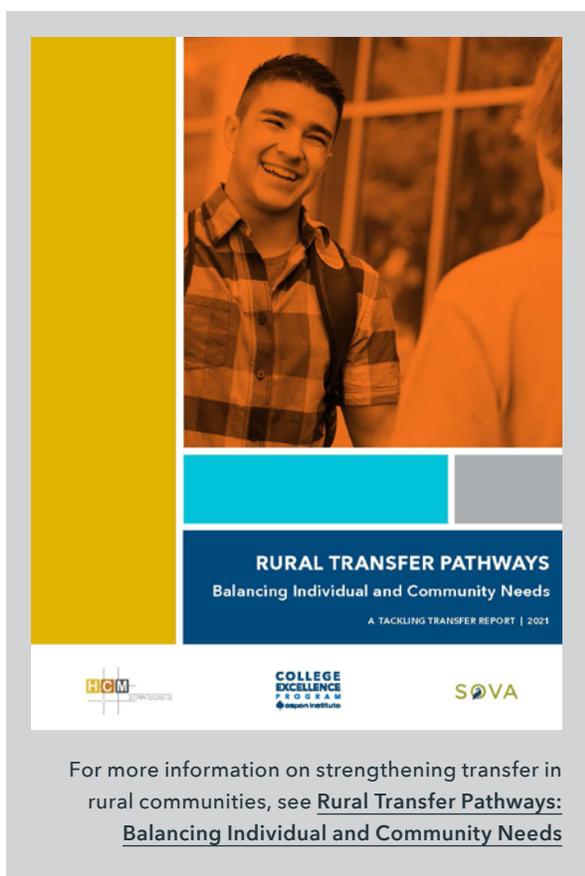
 A strong example comes from **West Kentucky Community and Technical College**, located on the banks of the Ohio River. Many in the

college's service area, in and around Paducah, find employment in the river barge industry. But most who took entry-level jobs as deckhands failed to earn a family-sustaining wage and had limited opportunity for promotion. Meanwhile, riverboat operators needed more people with technical skills for multiple positions, including management. In response, the college created a certificate in diesel technology that fully articulates into associate degrees in marine technology and engineering, enabling deckhands to be promoted into boat maintenance and captain roles. Those associate degrees articulate to University of Kentucky bachelor's degrees in engineering, which can be completed on the community college campus. Deckhands with no formal training can go to West Kentucky for a certificate, an associate degree, and ultimately a bachelor's degree that leads to harbor management roles, all without leaving Paducah. Designed in collaboration with the river barge industry, this degree path has effectively closed the talent gaps the industry was experiencing.

In Northern California, leaders at **Shasta College** recognized a similar need for talent and opportunity to generate new career-aligned pathways. The college and its university partners—including California State University, Simpson University, and Columbia College—created a program called Bachelor's Through Online and Local Degrees that provides accessible pathways from community college to bachelor's degrees in high-demand fields such as business, criminal justice, early childhood education, information technology, and social work. After completing an associate degree at Shasta, students stay on the community college campus, taking both upper-division coursework online from a partner university and a series

of four one-credit, in-person Shasta courses (in university navigation, career development, job readiness, and graduate education). This arrangement gives students taking online courses continued access to valuable services on the community college campus and a local cohort of bachelor's-seeking students.

By designing program pathways with the end in mind—good jobs for graduates in areas of regional workforce need—West Kentucky and Shasta deliver economic mobility for students and needed talent for their communities.

RURAL TRANSFER PATHWAYS
Balancing Individual and Community Needs
A TACKLING TRANSFER REPORT | 2021

For more information on strengthening transfer in rural communities, see Rural Transfer Pathways: Balancing Individual and Community Needs

Generate New Industries and Employment Opportunities for Students

The most forward-thinking rural college leaders consider not just how to meet existing workforce needs, but how to develop new job opportunities. They look for trends in labor market data, pay attention to existing and emerging industries in similar areas, and talk to industry leaders and workforce development organizations to explore what might be possible in their communities. Understanding that most employers won't show up in rural communities uninvited, leaders take responsibility for attracting them and even developing new industry sectors.[30] This work is typically a team effort, with community college leaders working alongside local government officials, economic development authorities, larger existing employers, and sometimes state agencies to develop a forward-looking economic development agenda. Highly effective rural community college leaders play a key role in driving and supporting that collaboration.

Walla Walla Community College provides an excellent example. In the late 1990s, 17 wineries existed in its service area. College leaders understood that fertile land was widely available and that area winemakers were eager to see the industry grow—and national market analysis revealed both an increased national demand for high-end wine and that tourists in wine country typically spend more than twice the amount of tourists elsewhere.

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[30] Baldwin, Chris, Joe Schaffer, and Gretchen Schmidt "Rural Community Colleges: Challenges, Context, and Commitment to Students." National Center for Inquiry and Improvement. July 2021, https://ncii-improve.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/NCII-Rural-Leaders-Big-Picture-2021-1.pdf

The college initiated a collaboration with the City of Walla Walla, the Port of Walla Walla, Walla Walla County, and two major local employers: Nelson Irrigation and ETS Labs (which provided technical services to the budding Washington State wine industry). These partners helped the college raise $5 million from investors to open the Center for Enology and Viticulture in 2001.

Their strategy and hard work paid off. Within a decade, Walla Walla had more than 170 wineries in operation and is now a wine-tourist destination. That growth spurred additional development in wine distribution as well as the food and hospitality industries, which led to new programs at the college and new job opportunities for graduates.

Northwest Iowa Community College

Building on that success, Walla Walla College looked for additional economic opportunities to collaborate with regional partners, leading to a partnership in water management with local environmental groups, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and local farmers. This coalition built the Water and Environmental Center, where partners work together to solve water shortage problems and students earn degrees in watershed ecology, a field with growing demand in the region. Walla Walla also started a wind energy program to capitalize on the growing wind turbine industry, collaborating with regional partners to create new pathways to economic mobility for students.

Sometimes, colleges step up to help fill a hole left by employers who have relocated or shut down. In Hickory, North Carolina, the once-dominant furniture manufacturing industry has all but disappeared. Understanding that students needed new opportunities for living-wage jobs, leaders at **Catawba Valley Community College** set a bold goal: to become a major auto mechanic hub for the Southeastern United States. Leaders started by raising funds to build a state-of-the-art auto mechanic training facility in partnership with local auto dealers, providing an immediate path for students to good local jobs. Next, college leaders worked with local Toyota and Lexus dealerships— with whom the college had already built trust and strong partnerships by training employees—to lobby Toyota's national headquarters to appoint the college as a certified Toyota training center. Winning a bid to be the Southeastern United States Toyota Technical Education College Support Elite program provider, the college now trains Toyota technicians from North Carolina to Florida and Alabama. In this way,

Catawba Valley's efforts to deliver quality technicians grew into a regional partnership that benefits students and the community.

When advancing these kinds of new pathways and opportunities, leaders of excellent rural colleges consider the historical context of the communities they serve. At **Patrick & Henry Community College** in Martinsville, Virginia, that included the legacy of a large textile manufacturing industry, much of which shut down in the early 2000s, creating substantial economic hardship.[31] When considering how to help the community rebuild, Patrick & Henry leaders decided to focus on building a strong network of smaller employers to avoid, once again, a community over-reliant on a few large ones.

As a first step, the college partnered with Festo Didactic, a leader in advanced manufacturing training, to build a state-of-the-art mechatronics training facility that was recognized as a center of excellence by the National Coalition of Certification Centers. The strong program at this facility led to other successes: attracting Schock Industries, a German company, to the area for the first time and encouraging Ten Oaks, a local hardwood flooring manufacturer, to expand existing operations, creating additional opportunities for Patrick & Henry graduates.

Since 2015, Patrick & Henry has also partnered with the Chambers of Commerce in Henry County and Martinsville on an entrepreneurial incubation program and an eight-week entrepreneurial bootcamp. Thirty million dollars have been invested, resulting in the creation of 45 small businesses, 85 percent of which remain open two years after founding. And more than half of these businesses are owned by people of color, expanding economic opportunity in a place where a third of residents are people of color.

As in other rural communities, tribal colleges (most of which are rural or rural-serving institutions) often have a unique and leading role in economic development in their regions. Such is the case with **Diné College**, a tribal college headquartered in Tsaile, Arizona.

The college serves the Navajo Nation, an area that covers 27,000 square miles, larger than the state of West Virginia. Diné President Charles Roessel understands the college's role to be one of not just economic development but "nation-building." Roessel has advanced an ambitious vision for his college, including through the creation of sustainable businesses that can retain graduates in the Nation and generate income in a community with extreme economic hardship: Nearly 43 percent of the Navajo population lives in poverty, and only 7 percent of adults have a college degree.[32]

Diné does not have many large nearby industry partners. Attracting new ones is hard because much of the region lacks reliable services and road access, and about 90 percent of land is owned by the federal government, which prevents the construction of new permanent buildings.[33]

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[31] Gettleman, Jeffrey. "In Martinsville, Va., Fleece Has Lost Its Luster." March 3, 2002. Baltimore Sun. Accessed November 10, 2022. https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2002-03-03-0203030083-story.html.

[32] "Employment by sectors of the Navajo Nation." The Navajo Nation. Accessed November 10, 2022. http://navajobusiness.com/fastFacts/EconomicSectors.htm

[33] Wagner, Dennis and Craig Harris. "Why it's so difficult to build homes on the Navajo Reservation." The Arizona Republic. December 14, 2016. https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-investigations/2016/12/14/why-its-difficult-build-homes-navajo-reservation/79541556/

Given the tribe's history with uranium mining—which led to contaminated water and other widespread health issues—there also remains lingering skepticism of outside corporations.[34]

In light of these challenges, the college chose to start its own businesses, including a wool business that will offer significant employment opportunities to graduates. In the Navajo nation, sheep ranching has been a cultural and economic staple for hundreds of years. Given the long distances farmers often must travel to sell the wool and insufficient infrastructure to shear sheep and prepare wool in ways that yield, Navajo people working in this area earned only subsistence wages. In recent years, economic development leaders and Navajo elders have centralized the sale of wool and attracted external buyers. For its part, Diné College employs a grant-funded extension agent who trains and educates ranchers on how to efficiently shear and process wool.[35] These efforts have spurred growth in the wool market and improved incomes for workers and the tribe.

President Roessel has strategically engaged key community stakeholders, including local business leaders, to ensure that programs the college offers provide sustainable employment opportunities to graduates while also addressing the needs of the Navajo Nation.

The college has changed the composition of the board from solely tribal elders to also include local business leaders who can provide the college with an expanded understanding of employment trends. These new board members help the college make employer connections, provide mentorship and support to students, and provide legal and accounting expertise to the college. An example of a program that serves Navajo needs and delivers students to jobs: The college's extension programs offers a 10-week course to train students to become water scientists so they can identify contamination in wells from uranium mining runoff.[36]

No matter their region, colleges that deliver excellent workforce outcomes for their students and generate talent needed in their communities make sure their programs connect to existing workforce needs and proactively cultivate new jobs and industries. They pay close attention to their communities' needs, building on community strengths and learning from the past. And whenever economic opportunities are limited, they build new ones in partnership with others in their region and beyond.

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[34] Morales, Laurel. "For The Navajo Nation, Uranium Mining's Deadly Legacy Lingers." NPR April 10, 2016. https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/04/10/473547227/for-the-navajo-nation-uranium-minings-deadly-legacy-lingers.

[35] Petrovski, Leslie. "Wool on the Reservation?" https://www.interweave.com/article/knitting/navajo-wool-global-market/. Interweave. August 9, 2018.

[36] "UA, Diné College Receive $500K USDA Grant to Train Navajo Water Scientists." Fronteras. June 4, 2021. https://fronterasdesk.org/content/1689006/ua-din-college-receive-500k-usda-grant-train-navajo-water-scientists.

2. Convince Students to Enroll and Stay in College

Effective rural college leaders understand that they—and others at their colleges—must make the case to community members about how higher education can lead to better lives for students and a stronger community for everyone. Often, efforts to drive economic development and shape cultural perceptions inform one another: Colleges that consistently demonstrate positive impact from their programs of study can more readily strengthen a college-going culture.

Skepticism in rural communities about higher education's value originates from multiple places, according to the leaders interviewed for this guide. To some prospective students and families, higher education is perceived as elitist or exclusionary—a view that can be especially prevalent among those who have little exposure to college.[37] Others doubt the return on investment, especially in areas where, historically, individuals could secure stable, family-sustaining employment in manufacturing, energy, or agriculture with just a high school diploma. There is also a sense among potential students that they cannot afford the opportunity cost of forgoing working hours to pursue a degree, especially when college is far away from home or work. Regardless of what's behind this skepticism, our research shows that leaders at excellent rural colleges have found ways to effectively overcome it by thoughtfully designing communications and outreach strategies that meet students where they are and, more importantly, by providing strong, workforce-aligned educational programs that back their promises.

Overcome Misperceptions about Careers and Institutions

Research suggests that students who feel they belong in college and have a high degree of trust in educational institutions and their programs are more likely to enroll and persist through their programs.[38] **Patrick & Henry Community College** leaders realized that if they were to meet the talent needs of new manufacturing employers that had moved to their area, they needed to convince students that advanced manufacturing jobs are very different from the unstable manufacturing jobs that had left the community. "Manufacturing was a dirty word in the community," Patrick & Henry President Greg Hodges said. "If you said it, you had to go wash your mouth out with soap."

In 2016, the college had only two or three students enrolling in advanced manufacturing courses. The college amped up outreach, bringing students, families, and K-12 guidance counselors onto campus to show them the new facilities and explain potential career pathways. The college's messaging focused heavily on the program's connection to good

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[37] Pappano, Laura. 2017. "Voices from Rural America on Why (or Why Not) to Go to College." The New York Times, January 31, 2017, sec. Education. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/education/edlife/voices-from-rural-america-on-why-or-why-not-go-to-college.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&ion=Footer.

[38] "The Trust Gap Among College Students." Evidence-Based Improvement in Higher Education. National Survey of Student Engagement. Accessed November 10, 2022. https://nsse.indiana.edu/research/annual-results/trust/index.html.

jobs. Students were repeatedly told they could receive job offers—sometimes at as high as $36 an hour—and that some employers covered tuition. After five years of dedicated effort, the college is seeing every course filled within two days of registration opening.

At a time when other community colleges across the U.S. have struggled to fill classes, Patrick & Henry's enrollment has remained steady. "We haven't had an enrollment decline so much as we have an enrollment realignment," Hodges said. That comes from an understanding of what students really want: "a J-O-B degree," a term Hodges uses frequently.

For tribal colleges, the work of convincing students to enroll must be done against a backdrop of long-standing inequities and economic marginalization.[39] Recognizing this, **Diné College** leaders focus on building trust. The college embeds Navajo values, language, and traditions into all its curriculum so students can see the college's connection to the community, feel understood, and feel pride in their culture. In an area where many homes lack running water and electricity, the eight-story building on the main college campus stands in sharp contrast to what people are used to.[40] Understanding that this and other contextual factors might cause residents of the Navajo reservation to view a college as intimidating, Diné leaders dedicate resources to making the campus approachable.[41] The college's main building and its dorms are built to resemble a hogon, the traditional home of the Navajo

people. The library is at the center of the building and represents where the fire would be in the hogon. These design choices have helped create a greater sense of belonging and trust among the students and, more broadly, the Navajo people. In an area where only 7 percent of adults have a college degree, these strategies have contributed to an impressive 60 percent increase in degrees awarded by the college annually since 2010.

Evolve Outreach as Demographics Change

In communities with changing demographics, efforts to build visibility and trust must also evolve if they are to succeed. Leaders at effective rural colleges pay attention to shifting demographics in their area's K-12 schools, then use that information to identify what the growing populations of students and families value, who is best suited to reach them, and how to convey the messages that will bring them to campus.

Northwest Iowa Community College is in a region with a fast-growing Hispanic population: Between 2010 and 2020, the Hispanic population of Sheldon, Iowa, nearly doubled.[42] Many immigrant parents with children moving through the K-12 system have limited proficiency in English. The college has long held campus visits for high school juniors and seniors, but Northwest Iowa leaders saw that in order to reach the growing Hispanic

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[39] Crazy Bull, Cheryl and Justin Guillory, "Revolution in Higher Education: Identity & Cultural Beliefs Inspire Tribal Colleges & Universities," 2018. Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/010_Crazy-Bull-Guillory-pp095-105.pdf

[40] "Life in Rural America: Part II." May 2019. NPR, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. https://media.npr.org/documents/2019/may/NPR-RWJF-HARVARD_Rural_Poll_Part_2.pdf.

[41] Bogody, Candace. September 20, 2010. "Overcoming the Hurdles to College as a Navajo Student." The Nation. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/overcoming-hurdles-college-navajo-student/

[42] Author's calculation using data from U.S. Census Bureau

population, the college would need to modify its approach. The solution: A series of events called "Latino Thunder Fridays," (named after the college's mascot, "Thunder") designed to bring students and families to campus and show them that the college understands their needs. The events, conducted completely in Spanish, include a sit-down meeting with faculty members in students' fields of interest. The results have been outstanding: 75 percent of students who participate in Latino Thunder Fridays enroll at the college.

In addition to the growing Hispanic student population, Northwest Iowa enrolls a sizable number of students from Kenya, Egypt, and Uganda. The college helps these students feel welcomed, accepted, and supported by giving them practical guidance on how to succeed in the small town of Sheldon, population 5,178. Advisors and other student support staff proactively contact students in their programs and provide information on how to navigate
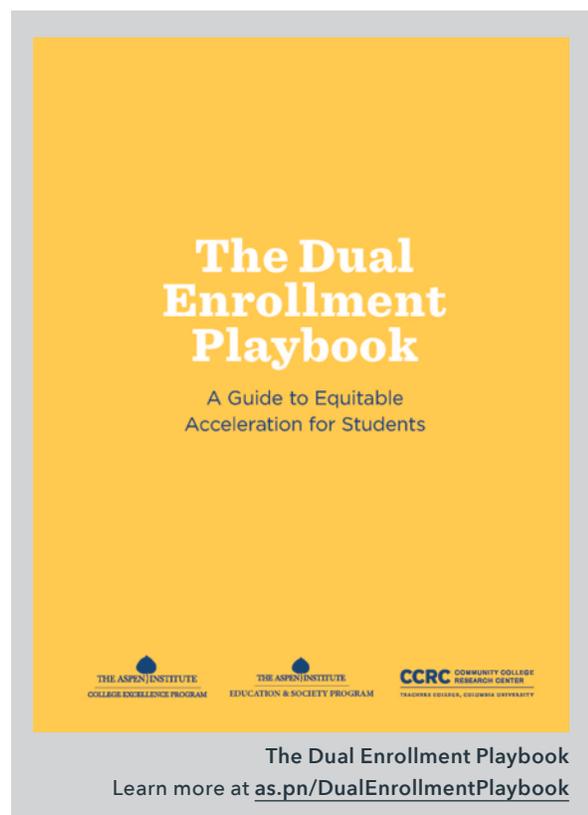
Iowa winters (including buying winter clothing) and life in rural America.

Northwest Iowa leaders view Hispanic and African students not just as potential regional workers but as assets to the college and community. The college hosts monthly events on campus, open to all students and Sheldon residents, that showcase different cultures. In one recent event, "A Taste of the World," 23 students and 10 staff prepared food, decorations, and presentations representing 21 different countries. Multicultural leader Samson Nyambati and nursing student Daniel Nyanchoga led everyone in Kenyan dances and songs, and Mexican students showcased the popular line dance Caballo Dorado. Over 150 attended, including staff, students, Northwest Iowa board members, and representatives from the multicultural clubs at nearby four-year partners, Dordt University and Northwestern College.

Start the College-Going Pathway in High School

Establishing a reliable presence in K-12 schools is a central strategy used by strong rural community colleges working to advance trust and belonging among potential students. But deep engagement with K-12 schools requires an investment of resources. Dual enrollment programs, for example, can require significant staff time and money from a college, and don't always generate the same revenue as enrollment of students after high school. Even so, leaders of excellent rural colleges understand that increasing dual enrollment helps more students start on the path to a college credential, which benefits both the community and the college.

In the small town of Zanesville, Ohio—where **Zane State College** is located—community leaders
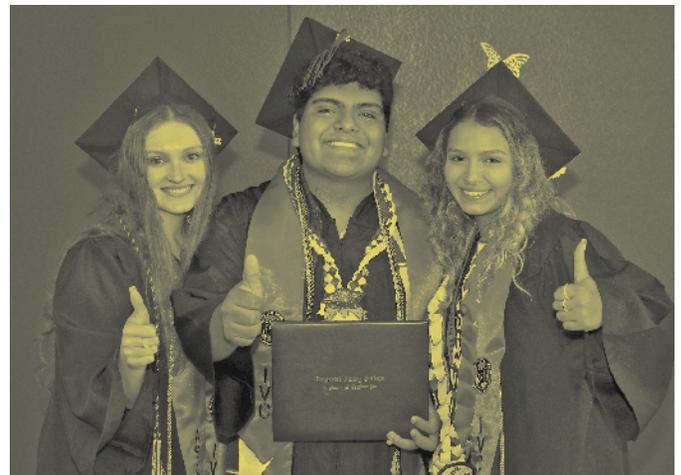
The Dual Enrollment Playbook
Learn more at **as.pn/DualEnrollmentPlaybook**

knew they needed to tackle their region's social and economic challenges head-on. "There is some pressure to not do better than your parents," Doug Baker, the superintendent of Zanesville City School District, explained. "One of my students went to a university in Cincinnati, hit a snag with financial aid and had to move back home. Her mom then started telling her, 'You're from Zanesville, you'll get a job in Zanesville, and you'll marry a boy from Zanesville.'" In other words, "College is not for you."

To build and strengthen a college-going culture, Zane State partnered with the school district to establish a robust dual enrollment program. While not all dual enrollment students come to Zane State after high school, the college's leaders believe that broadening exposure and access to college courses is important for the community, as is the confidence gained when students succeed in them. When data analysis revealed that some dually enrolled students never continue to college, Zane State identified nearly 1,000 students who earned college credit in high school but never enrolled in any postsecondary institution after graduating, and is now actively recruiting them, showing them pathways to economic mobility.

Guided by the idea that students who graduate from high school already on a college degree path are more likely to understand the value of continuing in college, Zane State also works directly with high school advisors to help dually enrolled high school students take courses tightly aligned to degree pathways. The college has equipped local K-12 advisors with information about which Zane State courses fit into certain pathways and access to documents showing continuing students how close they are to completing a degree.

Another rural community college that has established strong dual enrollment pathways: **Imperial Valley College** in a rural part of Southern California near the Mexico border. The college has developed a deep relationship with its K-12 system, providing students dual enrollment courses alongside robust guidance on college. Instead of waiting until students graduate, Imperial Valley College advising staff go into high schools to help students complete financial aid applications, choose a program of study, and understand what preparatory work they need to complete an associate degree. As a result of the college's efforts, many students leave high school with an educational plan, developed with the help of high school advisors (rather than solely through staff on the community college payroll). The percentage of high school graduates who go on to enroll at Imperial Valley is much higher than at other community colleges, ranging from 60 percent to 88 percent, depending on the high school. And those students persist: The increases in high school advising and financial aid support provided to high school students have coincided with a steadily increasing completion rate at Imperial Valley for the area's high school graduates.

Imperial Valley College | *Imperial, California*

COLLEGE
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Address K-12 School Resource Needs and Student Financial Barriers

Providing resources to struggling high schools can also be a path to strong K-12 partnerships. **Colorado Mountain College** leaders saw an opportunity to do just that when, in 2012, budget cuts forced local high schools in Glenwood Springs, near one of the college's campuses, to move to a four-day week to save $500,000 annually.[43] Recognizing the difficulties that no-school Fridays presented for working parents, Colorado Mountain College partnered with the school district to offer "career academies" in programs ranging from certified nursing assistance to welding to graphic design. Through these programs, many high school students have earned degrees; participating high schools now host standing-room-only graduation ceremonies for high school students who also complete a college credential.

Large geographic distances and limited transportation options often impede dual enrollment access in rural communities. To solve this problem, **Wenatchee Valley College** strategically sited an education center to increase access to geographically isolated students and provides grant funding to rural high schools to help rural and Native American students take dual enrollment courses there. **Columbia Basin College**, also in Washington, provides gas cards for dual enrollment students who live farther than 25 miles from the college so they can visit the campus. The efforts of these two colleges have helped increase college access in their regions, especially among the growing Hispanic population.[44]

Remove the Earn-or-Learn Dilemma for Low-Income Students

Leaders at effective community colleges understand that students want, and often need, to earn money right after high school. Rather than forcing students to choose between college and a job, effective rural colleges ensure that students have simultaneous access to both. There are multiple models that pay students as they develop skills aligned to their ultimate goal: a good job and fulfilling career.

In **Zane State College's** Appalachian service area, students often face pressure to earn full-time wages after high school to support their families. So, the college partners with regional employers to create "earn-and-learn" opportunities. Students attend class two days a week and, on the other three, get on-the-job training directly related to their coursework. Students receive wages while progressing in a program that will benefit them after they graduate. The college started in an area of community need, establishing partnerships with local employers who needed bookkeepers and accountants. Employers report benefiting immediately from the work the student-interns provided. Due to the success of the program, the college will soon spread this model to engineering and medical laboratory technician fields, where there are also regional shortages.

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[43] Stroud, John. March 12, 2012. "Garfield Re-2 Board OKs Four-Day Week." Post Independent. Accessed November 10, 2022. https://www.postindependent.com/news/garfield-re-2-board-oks-four-day-week/.

[44] Mehl, Gelsey, Joshua Wyner, Elisabeth Barnett, John Fink, and Davis Jenkins. 2020. "The Dual Enrollment Playbook: A Guide to Equitable Acceleration for Students." The Aspen Institute. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ASP-2020-Dual-Enrollment-Playbook.pdf

Advance Retention with Equity in Mind

Nationally, community colleges have failed to retain and graduate students of color and those from low-income families at the same rates as other students.[45] But the conversation around, and the strategies for, advancing equity in student retention and graduation can look different in rural communities, especially as political polarization has increased and conversations about race have become more charged in recent years.[46] While successful rural community colleges often use similar strategies as urban colleges to close equity gaps, rural leaders at times communicate about those strategies differently, using language that resonates in their communities.

With a student population that is almost all Navajo, the professional development center at Diné College trains faculty on how to advance equity with students' Navajo culture at the center. Building on the sacred Navajo concept of "Sa'ah Naaghai Bik'eh Hozhoo," which places Navajo life in harmony with the natural world, Diné emphasizes social responsibility and resilience. Students' pathways are grounded in familiar cultural references like the cycle of seasons, or night and day. From entry to post-graduation success, students learn how Nitsáhákees (Thinking), Nahat'á (Planning), Iiná (Living) and Sihasin (Assuring) are the key "seasons.'' Each of these concepts maps to key junctures in a student's academic path: thinking about the right major, planning financial aid, following a degree plan, and preparing for life after college.

This connection to Navajo culture and philosophy not only guides how students progress, but also how the college expects faculty and staff to support students. The college's faculty development efforts are based in storytelling, a fundamental component of Navajo life. For instance, Diné faculty explored how different equity challenges appear in a majority Native American population by sharing stories about their own experiences. As a result, faculty and staff have in recent years strategized about how to better support LGBTQ+ students, engage with students with different tribal backgrounds, support students dealing with mental health issues, and better support students living with disabilities.[47]

Successful colleges also pay attention to the specific needs of students who come from low-income backgrounds. Rural-serving **Amarillo College** in the Texas Panhandle and **Patrick & Henry Community College** in southern Virginia have both centered anti-poverty in their student success strategies. Amarillo College President Russell Lowery-Hart knew that low-income students and students of color—who make up half of Amarillo students—completed degrees at lower rates than other students. He investigated why, and, finding a connection to both poverty and ethnicity, used data and student stories to advance a solution.

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[45] Farrigan, Tracey. November 2, 2020. "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Educational Attainment Persist in Rural America." Economic Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture. https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2020/november/racial-and-ethnic-disparities-in-educational-attainment-persist-in-rural-america/.

[46] Parker, Kim, Juliana Horowitz, Anna Brown, Richard Fry, D'vera Cohn and Ruth Igielinik. "How Urban, Suburban and Rural Residents' View Social and Political Issues." Pew Research Center. May 22, 2018. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/urban-suburban-and-rural-residents-views-on-key-social-and-political-issues/.

[47] "Educational Philosophy." Diné College. https://www.dinecollege.edu/about_dc/educational-philosophy/.

Lowery-Hart created an archetypal student persona, called "Maria," and put her at the center of his senior team's decision-making. The persona—constructed from the most common traits of an Amarillo College student—is a 27-year-old, Latina student of limited financial means, the first in her family to go to college, attending part-time, and working two jobs to support her children. Maria, who embodies the financial challenges most Amarillo students faced, helped keep college leaders and staff focused on the student experience as they devised reforms. Lowery-Hart employed this persona to make the financial barriers that students face clear and concrete, consistently leading and challenging his colleagues to craft concrete solutions to address what Maria would likely experience.

"We showcased Maria's voice at every general assembly, every town hall," Lowery-Hart said. "We had 'no-excuses meetings', where we talked about Maria, listened to Maria, and we talked about data … to explain why we had to transform and to give voice to what that transformation would look like." Changes included new and expanded provision of basic needs: food pantries, transportation, emergency grants, and, during the pandemic, a school bus equipped with mobile Wi-fi in the college parking lot. These measures, combined with systemic efforts to clarify degree pathways and strengthen advising, have helped Amarillo improve graduation rates from 27 percent to 45 percent over five years.

To advance his college's goals to help every student succeed, **Patrick & Henry** President Greg Hodges made a strategic shift in how he uses and displays data. Many colleges set a goal of eliminating equity gaps and compare the success rates of different student group by race and ethnicity. Instead, Patrick & Henry leaders set a college-wide graduation rate goal that is higher than any single demographic group's current graduation rate, and they display success rates for each subgroup in comparison to the college-wide goal. In this way, Hodges explained, leaders demonstrate that the college is working to make sure all students attain better outcomes while also justifying some efforts targeted at those groups furthest from the college-wide goal. College leaders also refer to the gaps between the overall goal and the subgroup rates as student opportunity gaps instead of equity gaps. "We move forward with the work but without being mired in the language that has become so divisive," Hodges said.

He also emphasizes the goal of advancing economic mobility for all students. When faced with political questions or opposition to college policies designed to achieve equitable outcomes, he often says, "These are very challenging times, but your support of our institution enables us to lift people out of poverty."

3. Build Strategic Partnerships to Resource Student Success

Rural community college leaders often develop and maintain relationships with employers, leaders from K-12 schools and universities, and other community leaders. What distinguishes exceptional rural college leaders is how they translate the rapport developed at business meetings, over coffee chats, and during regular run-ins at local events into sustained, mission-driven partnerships that provide high-quality opportunities for students, train workers for the regional economy, and deliver needed services for both.

Partner with Local Employers and Community Organizations to Generate Mission-Aligned Resources

Presidents of exceptional rural colleges know the relationships they have with local industries, political leaders, and other organizations are key to securing more resources and opportunities for their students and communities. So they formalize those relationships, establishing regular meetings that are anchored in shared goals, rooted in current data, and guided by clear agendas. It's through these structured relationships that college leaders develop and advance mission-oriented partnerships that contribute to long-term advances in student success.

Rural community college presidents have an opportunity to be especially influential in their communities, simply because there are fewer people in formal leadership positions. **Northwest Iowa Community College** President John Hartog used his position to create opportunities for collaboration among his area's biggest institutions. He participates in a standing biweekly meeting of the "Big Five": county leadership, the Sheldon city manager, the K-12 superintendent, and representatives from state legislators' and congressional staffs. What started as informal conversations between the city manager and President Hartog grew

as needs and topics arose. Now that all these representatives meet on a regular basis, they can, in their words, "take turns winning."

Together, they've worked to develop solutions to the community's capital improvement needs and complex challenges around housing shortages, clean water, fentanyl abuse, and damage from windstorms. These collaborations provide a multitude of benefits. For instance, leaders from the college and the K-12 system worked together to fund and build a shared turf field for community sporting events, which, in addition to providing recreation space for the community, brought more visibility to the college, a plus for recruiting. It was also a useful hands-on learning experience for students in the college's heavy machinery program, who participated in its construction.

One important way rural community colleges create new opportunities for students is by securing funding and other resources from community partners. Such was the case at **Patrick & Henry Community College**, where the welding program, which had only 16 welding benches, was unable to keep pace with demand. The college developed plans to expand capacity

on its Martinsville campus and to partner with K-12 schools to provide opportunities for high school students and adults to earn welding certificates in the more remote and mountainous parts of the college's service area. The question was how to finance this expansion.

A local foundation, the Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission, had money to spend on expanding training, but would not directly support K-12 school district operations, which it considered a recurring local funding responsibility. So, Patrick & Henry submitted the grant application and received funding to purchase 45 additional welding benches that both adults and high school students could use. It was a win for all involved. The college doubled the number of welding credentials it conferred each year, helped close a gap in regional talent, and provided good-paying jobs to dozens more students.

The college has also successfully secured funding for its manufacturing program. By pairing the college's mission and the economic

Patrick & Henry Community College | *Martinsville, Virginia*

development needs in the community, Patrick & Henry secured funding from a local foundation interested in attracting new industries to the area. The Harvest Foundation, a local funder created with money from the sale of a hospital, wanted to be sure that the college was focused on generating new industries instead of waiting for manufacturing jobs to return. College leaders showed the foundation its advanced manufacturing facilities and shared their vision for a new and better manufacturing industry in the region. The foundation, impressed by what they saw, provided funding to expand advanced manufacturing programs, which enabled the college to meet existing business needs and attract new industries to the area.

Partnering with industry leaders can also create opportunities and generate resources for students. For example, **Northwest Iowa Community College** partnered with SnapOn, a major tool manufacturer, to reduce costs for automotive technology students. Previously, students had to buy tools at the start of the program, which cost thousands of dollars, an amount few could afford. Now, SnapOn provides tools to students for a minimal fee each term, which is then credited to students' purchase of the tools upon program completion. When the college did not have money to hire new instructors for the program, they turned to other companies to fund instructors' salaries for a finite period of time. Once program enrollments were up, the college was able to use tuition revenue to support the entire cost of faculty. The initial boost from industry helped the college scale its program and deliver more skilled workers. These industry partnerships provide many benefits, including free and low-cost program equipment, scholarships for students in credit programs, and unique opportunities for students to be interviewed and hired after graduation.

Leverage Institutional Consortia to Enhance Mission-Aligned Functions

To address resource constraints and advance mission-critical functions, strong rural colleges establish creative partnerships, often with other colleges. A leading example comes from **Northwest Iowa Community College**, which is part of several consortia with other community colleges and regional universities to share services. The College Alliance Sharing Technologies (CAST), for example, was created by Northwest Iowa and three other Iowa community colleges to share external research and technology functions. The CAST office handles state-level reporting, houses equipment and hardware, and manages a shared enterprise resource planning system, which contains financial aid records, business services, and other student information. Northwest Iowa leaders report that this shared resource frees up their institutional researcher's time to do mission-critical student success work, such as generating weekly grade reports and program-level retention reports. Faculty use these reports to compare their program's retention rate to those across the college, an important part of the college's annual program review process. If a program falls below institutional average levels, faculty must develop an action plan for improvement.

Freed-up IR capacity also enables college leaders to receive enhanced student outcome data reports, which provided new insights that led to new success strategies. For example, one enhanced report revealed that working adults were struggling to complete general education courses. Further investigation revealed that daytime scheduling was partially to blame, so the course schedule was revamped to offer more evening sections. Other solutions, such as enhanced tutoring and supplemental instruction, a move to eight-week courses, and faculty professional development have all arisen from deeper data use that was made possible by first sharing critical IT and reporting services with other institutions.

Northwest Iowa also belongs to college partnerships that expand students' access to online courses and aid in their success. One consortium—called the Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCOC)—enables Northwest Iowa and its partners to jointly offer courses that each individual college either wouldn't be able to fill alone or would struggle to hire faculty to teach. Another consortium of nine community colleges across Iowa and Illinois enabled Northwest Iowa to purchase Dropout Detective, software that supports advising and an early alert system the college uses to target support for students struggling in online courses. Northwest Iowa pays a small additional amount to use the technology to support in-person courses. The college takes a similar approach to jointly fund its student information system. Instead of purchasing a lower-performing system, the college participates in consortium pricing, which has enabled it to secure a much more sophisticated student information system than it could afford on its own.

Northwest Iowa Community College | *Sheldon, Iowa*

Partner to Expand Bachelor's Attainment

Effective rural community colleges develop formal partnerships with local and regional higher education institutions to overcome geographic barriers to transfer and develop needed regional talent.

Relatively few four-year colleges and universities are located in rural communities, limiting access to bachelor's degrees and the good jobs that require them. Successful rural community colleges work with universities to develop transfer pathways that allow students to complete a bachelor's degree close to home.

The New College Institute is an educational center established in 2006 to expand access to higher education in southern Virginia, including the rural areas surrounding Martinsville, where **Patrick & Henry Community College** is located. Funding from a local philanthropy, the Harvest Foundation, helped build the institute, while ongoing funding for faculty and space is provided by the state of Virginia as well as community colleges and four-year universities. In addition to workforce training, the institute

offers opportunities for Patrick & Henry students to remain close to home while earning bachelor's degrees in programs of substantial community and statewide need, including two-plus-two programs in cybersecurity and teacher education. Two primary university partners—Longwood and Radford—provide funding for the physical facility where they offer these degree programs in partnership with Patrick & Henry, ensuring the availability of faculty for upper-division courses.

A similar opportunity is available to students at **Northwest Iowa Community College**, which is at least three and a half hours away from all three Iowa public universities. To expand educational access to rural Iowans, the universities created four Western Iowa Regents Resource Centers that provide online access to bachelor's degrees, including for community college transfer students. The resource center in Sioux City partners with Northwest Iowa to help fund a staff member who makes sure students can earn a bachelor's degree online while still accessing the strong student services at the resource center.

Catawba Valley Community College | *Hickory, North Carolina*

The staff members helps students select the right courses for their intended transfer degree and addresses student needs.

Through this partnership, the Iowa Board of Regents provides an annual report to Northwest Iowa detailing transfer rates, GPA before and after transfer, credits earned in first term, and retention after transfer. These data are used by the registrar, associate of arts academic advisors, and other Northwest Iowa college administrators to identify which institutional relationships can be strengthened. This partnership has delivered results: Northwest Iowa transfer students have a higher average first-term GPA than other students in the state (3.13, compared to 2.8), complete more credit hours than other Iowa transfer students, and have a first-year retention rate at the state's three public universities of 95 percent.

In Kentucky, a partnership between **West Kentucky Community and Technical College** and a four-year university program is helping ease a shortage of mental health providers in the community. Lindsey Wilson College's School of Professional Counseling (LWC), a four-year university program that trains licensed counselors across Appalachia, rents space on West Kentucky's campus, where it delivers upper-division courses to West Kentucky students, taught by a combination of adjunct faculty based in the community and full-time faculty who commute. LWC employs an onsite enrollment coordinator, who helps students navigate transfer, registration, and financial aid. West Kentucky students who graduate from LWC have a clear pathway to a counseling career, and their communities receive trained mental health professionals. An added benefit: Some transfer graduates remain in the local area and provide mental health support to students.

Imperial Valley College | *Imperial, California*

4. Utilize Small Size as a Strength

Rural community colleges enroll an average of about 2,500 students, less than a third of the national average. While smaller enrollments can limit financial resources, there are upsides to a small college environment. The relatively small number of faculty, staff, administrators, and students can enable interpersonal relationships to flourish, and highly effective rural colleges take advantage of their small size to personalize advising and faculty-student relationships. Out of necessity, strong rural colleges also assign multiple roles to individual leaders, roles that are usually managed independently at a larger institution. Our research found that combining responsibilities—while at times burdensome—can increase coordination between different parts of the college and, in turn, strengthen the effectiveness of student success strategies.

Combine Functions That Align Initiatives and Enhance Student Success Strategy

Rural college leaders, especially those with small budgets and enrollments, expressed during our research how difficult it can be to recruit for and fund specialized positions needed to meet student success goals. Among the most difficult-to-fill positions are grant writers, institutional researchers, and information technology professionals, roles in demand by many colleges and employers. To fill these functions, several colleges researched for this report combined positions, particularly those responsible for student success, data analytics, and technology.

Zane State College leaders combined information technology (IT) and institutional research (IR) into one department under a single executive director, recognizing that IT systems hold much of the data that institutional researchers need to understand student needs and evaluate the effectiveness of student success strategies. In addition to saving money, this merger helped advance student success work by both enhancing the college's data capacity and creating a structure to engage more leaders in student success data analysis. Zane State established a data quality team of representatives from the registrar, business office, and admissions, led by the IR director, which analyzes data in response to specific questions, such as whether a student failing a course has longer-term implications for that student's success.

Data quality team members consult with senior leaders about who needs what data, when they need it, and how it can best be shared, including what messaging would be most effective in promoting data use. This approach is designed to help increase everyone's focus on the data most aligned to the college's priorities, reducing the likelihood that cabinet members or other leaders receive data they don't need and cannot find time to use. The data quality team also led the college's "Know Your Number" campaign, which was designed to ensure that more part-time students take 20 credits and full-time students take 30 credits annually. As they have educated faculty and staff about this campaign, college leaders and the data quality team have been careful to explain that a positive correlation between students taking more credits and graduating does not mean increasing credit loads is always the right solution; they need to
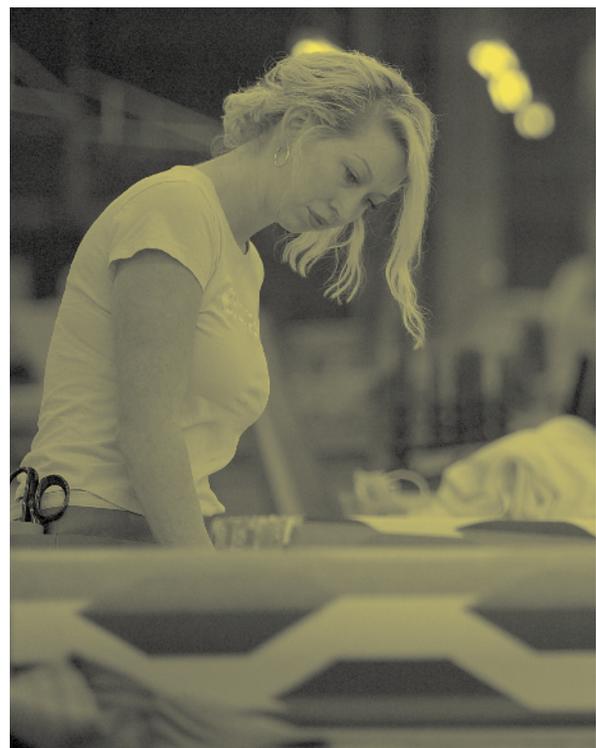
consider whether students have children, work full-time, or have other obligations that might stand in the way of increasing credits.

As a result of the data quality team's efforts, Zane State faculty and staff know the same key data points, and leaders have been able to more clearly communicate their expectation that staff in each functional area take action when gaps are revealed. As a result, the college diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) team is studying the courses students fail in their first semester and year. The advising department is studying overall retention rates, success in first-year experience courses in the first three weeks, success in math and English in the first year, and how many students are making progress toward the 30-credit-hour benchmark. The findings and related goals that result from these analyses will be shared with the broader college community, so everyone can craft reform plans aligned to college-wide priorities. Because each of the metrics examined was prioritized by college leaders and the data quality team, the efforts of those working specifically on DEI and advising reforms are more likely to align to college-wide student success goals.

Skilled IR leaders and teams are critically important to using data to improve student success, but there are often few candidates willing to work at the pay community colleges can offer, and urban colleges with more resources often outbid rural ones for qualified candidates. In response, some rural community colleges have enhanced salaries and retained needed talent by combining IR with other roles.
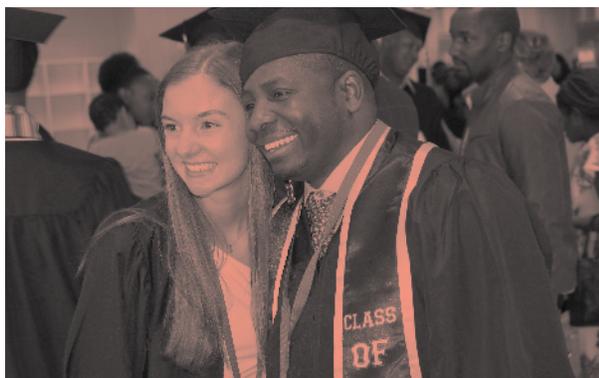
At **Patrick & Henry Community College**, Chris Wikstrom leads an IR team of two while, at the same time, serving as vice president of student and academic services. The combined role enables him to effectively and efficiently lead data-informed student success efforts. When

the college needed to track course outcomes data to better understand the particular barriers students face, Wikstrom enlisted two faculty members to help with data analysis and research. To support implementation and evaluation of student success strategies, the college's IT department hired a programmer with app development experience who could create data dashboards and other homegrown systems, alleviating the need for the small IR department to translate data into a usable format. This allowed the IR team to devote its energy to developing usable insights from the data. For example, the IR team was able to explore course registration data to understand what prevented students from enrolling in and completing programs. That, in turn, resulted in providing more timely reports to advisors about students at risk of being dropped from classes. In each of these cases, Wikstrom's leadership of both IR and student and academic services enabled the college to work to advance quickly, in an integrated way.

Catawba Valley Community College | *Hickory, North Carolina*

Northwest Iowa Community College took a similar approach, combining institutional research with student success functions. Mariah Oliver serves as the college's grant writer, student support coordinator, and IR leader—and brings a valuable data orientation to each role. This combination of responsibilities allows her to understand student needs, respond with student-facing strategies, and raise external funds to support those strategies. For instance, Oliver and her application administrator generate a weekly grade report using Learning Management System data. Those reports are used by faculty to prioritize which students need interventions, so a team of advisors and faculty can contact those students to help them stay on track to graduate. Helping everyone focus on using this single report might not happen if an IR director were independently generating data insights, without such a complete understanding of the college's prioritized student success strategy. This strategy (and others implemented over time) have enabled the college to achieve an impressive 73 percent three-year graduation and transfer rate—and Oliver uses her deep understanding of those strategies to make the college's case in grant applications for funding future strategies.

Northwest Iowa Community College | *Sheldon, Iowa*

Strengthen Relationship-Driven Advising with Intentional Strategy

Research shows that colleges can effectively advance student success when advisors proactively connect with students to help them choose a program aligned to their post-graduation goals, stay on track to graduation, and receive needed resources.[48] Many rural colleges report that they struggle to hire enough advisors to fulfill these functions. But while some rural colleges seem to rely on interpersonal relationships among faculty, staff, and students to advise students, relationships alone rarely lead to excellent and equitable student outcomes. Without systems to ensure that every student is supported, too many students fall through the cracks, especially when faculty and staff retire or leave the college. Effective rural colleges create a strong advising infrastructure to ensure that students are consistently supported from entry to graduation.

Lake Area Technical College employs an innovative approach to advising, enabled by its cohort-based programs. When students enter the college, they do not choose courses, instead embarking on a prescribed program of study alongside a cohort of, on average, 17 students, who remain together throughout their program. The college employs no professional advisors and instead relies on program faculty to advise students in each cohort. To ensure that new faculty learn how to deliver effective advising, veteran faculty members mentor new ones. While students are required to meet with faculty advisors, it is the proximity of the cohort and faculty in the same courses, day after day, that likely makes the biggest difference.

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[48] Jenkins, Davis, and Sung-Woo Cho. 2012. "Get with the Program: Accelerating Community College Students' Entry into and Completion of Programs of Study." Community College Research Center. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/get-with-the-program.html.

Northwest Iowa Community College | *Sheldon, Iowa*

When a student is absent, it's obvious, and someone in the class usually knows why, making it possible for the faculty member to reach out and help solve challenges. Faculty report that their intensive advising role makes them better teachers because they understand students' academic and nonacademic needs. As a result of these and other efforts, Lake Area Tech boasts an impressive 76 percent three-year graduation and transfer rate, 30 percentage points higher than the national average.

Few colleges are organized around such structured programs. Those with more flexible programs and greater course choice almost always rely on some professional advisors, but many rural colleges lack the resources to hire enough advisors to help students as much as they need. So, it's typical for rural colleges to use faculty—who often teach the same students in multiple classes—to supplement small teams of professional advisors who concentrate on a few critical parts of the student lifecycle.

Patrick & Henry uses a tiered advising model to help students at key milestones. Five professional advisors help with registration and onboarding before handing students off in the second semester to full-time faculty advisors, who provide program-specific guidance. Patrick & Henry's approach effectively assigns duties based on the strengths and capacities of advisors and faculty. Professional advisors have the right training and timing to provide the focused support needed to help students make program choices early in their first year, ensuring that students get onto a solid path quickly. Faculty advisors employ their subject matter expertise, industry connections, and regular proximity to students to help them progress through programs.

The relationships rural college faculty and staff build with students can yield actionable information, but that information is more likely to be used if there are formal structures in place to capture and communicate it. At **Zane State**, college leaders recognized that because so

many student supports flowed from personal relationships with staff, some students' needs were being overlooked, and resources weren't always going to the students who needed them most. As part of a first-year experience course, the college created a mandatory intake survey that includes eight questions about demographics and specific obstacles students may face. Responses to that survey are analyzed alongside high school GPAs and Satisfactory Academic Progress status to assign students a low-, medium- or high-risk rating, which college success coaches use to deliver different amounts of outreach and support. The success coaches can also mobilize resources across divisions, including from faculty members who play a critical role in helping students choose and stay on a program pathway.

This was an improvement from the past, when Zane State success coaches relied on students coming to them with challenges or faculty flagging concerns. College leaders now expect success coaches to proactively contact the students who are at the highest risk of not persisting, and to alert the faculty teaching these students so they can reach out, too. This intentional approach to advising has contributed to the college's rapid increase in three-year completion rates from 34 percent for the 2012 cohort of first-time, full-time students to 54 percent four years later.[49]

Catawba Valley Community College | Hickory, North Carolina

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[49] Jenkins, Davis, Serena Klempin, and Hana Lahr. "Zane State College Weaving Projects and Budgets Together to Support Student Success Overview of Guided Pathways Reforms at the College Large-Scale Changes to Practices." Accessed November 10, 2022. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/zane-state-college-case-study.pdf.

Conclusion

Excellent rural community colleges across the United States have many strengths: internal agility; deep connections to place; and strong relationships among faculty, staff, and students. When strategically deployed, these strengths help rural colleges reform their internal operations and develop exceptional partnerships that result in excellent and equitable student outcomes and contribute to community vitality. Failure to marshal those strengths is a lost opportunity to foster economic opportunity for community members and develop talent needed in rural areas.

We hope the examples of excellence featured in this report provide inspiration for community colleges across the country and ideas about how to apply their assets to the critical goal of strengthening the lives of rural community college students and entire rural communities. We look forward to seeing how the lessons offered by these college fuel further rural community college excellence.

Northwest Iowa Community College | *Sheldon, Iowa*

Conclusion

Research Design

The lessons and examples included in this publication come from several research projects of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program.

Original research for this project began with an evaluation of student outcomes data for all rural and rural-serving public community colleges in the U.S., which we defined using Carnegie Classification. Primary student outcomes data included first-year retention, three-year graduation rates disaggregated by race/ethnicity and Pell Grant status, median earnings 10 years after entering the institution, the percentage of students who came from families in the bottom 20 percent of income and moved into the top income quintile after graduating (using Opportunity Insights' Mobility Index), and the transfer and bachelor's completion rate for rural institutions in the Aspen Prize's Top 150 eligible list (using National Student Clearinghouse data). Median student earnings data were compared to the median family income of the county in which each college is located, and the bachelor's completion rate was compared to the county's bachelor's attainment rate. Institutions with student earnings that are closer to the county's median family income, and those with bachelor's completion rates closer to or above

the county's bachelor's attainment rate were considered to have stronger outcomes. We identified institutions with strong outcomes on these measures controlling for regional location, proximity to a metro area, student headcount, racial demographics, and comprehensive vs technical orientation. We circulated a list of those institutions to experts in rural community college practice, asking which did strong student-oriented reforms work, yielding 25 institutions. We conducted one-hour interviews with the leaders of each of these 25, gathering information about reform practices and related outcomes. From those interviews, we identified a diverse set of five colleges doing exceptional work and conducted, for each, 1.5-day site visits that included interviews with leadership, faculty, staff, external education partners, employers, and students.

This guide also draws upon research from rural and rural-serving institutions studied during multiple cycles of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence (see footnote for detail on the Prize methodology).[50] Additional research cited in this report comes from the Transfer Playbook, Workforce Playbook, and Rural Transfer Pathways report (methodology for which can be found in those publications).[51]

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[50] "Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence." The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-prize/. https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-prize/

[51] Davidson, Brittney, Tess Henthorne, Karthik Ilakkuvan, Linda Perlstein, Keith Witham, and Joshua Wyner. "The Workforce Playbook: A Community College Guide to Delivering Excellent Career and Technical Education." https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Workforce-Playbook_Final.pdf; Wyner, Joshua, KC Deane, Davis Jenkins, and John Fink."The Transfer Playbook: Essential Practice for Two-and Four-Year Colleges." https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/aspen-ccrc_transferplaybook_05-2016.pdf; Mehl, Gelsey, Tania LaViolet. "Rural Transfer Pathways: Balancing Individual and Community Needs." https://tacklingtransfer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Rural-Transfer-Pathways.pdf.

Community Colleges Featured in this Guide

1. **Wenatchee Valley College** – Wenatchee, Washington

2. **Walla Walla College** – Walla Walla, Washington

3. **Columbia Basin College** – Pasco, Washington

4. **Imperial Valley College** – Imperial, California

5. **Diné College** – Tsaile, Arizona

6. **Colorado Mountain College** – Glenwood Springs, Colorado

7. **Amarillo College** – Amarillo, Texas

8. **Lake Area Technical College** – Watertown, South Dakota

9. **Northwest Iowa Community College** – Sheldon, Iowa

10. **West Kentucky Community & Technical College** – Paducah, Kentucky

11. **Zane State College** – Zanesville, Ohio

12. **Catawba Valley Community College** – Hickory, North Carolina

13. **Patrick & Henry Community College** – Martinsville, Virginia