

STRENGTHENING RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES

RURAL.ACCT.ORG



A Project of the Association of Community College Trustees
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Purposes of the Initial Study

- Why study rural community colleges?
- Comprise between 600 and 800 colleges in the United States according the Rural Community College Alliance
- 260 according to the Federal government
- An underserved, larger 1st-generation, poorer population
- Lower college-going rate
- Unique challenges: left behind—and the political fallout that accompanies this sentiment
- Two Americas: socially and economically
- What can rural America and rural community colleges teach us?

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What Is Rural?

- Federal definition: any place that isn't urban...
- U.S. Census Bureau definition of urban
- Urban
 - Urbanized area: over 50,000 persons
 - Urban cluster: 2,500 to 50,000 persons
 - Metropolitan Statistical Area
- NCES: 12 different categories from Large City to Remote Rural Colleges
- Rural
 - Fringe: ≤ 2.5 miles from an urban cluster
 - Distant: > 2.5 miles from an urban cluster; ≤ 10 miles from an urban cluster
 - Remote: > 25 miles from an urbanized area and > 10 miles from an urban cluster

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Rural Community Colleges in the NCCCS

Study Parameters

- North Carolina one of five states chosen for study funded by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
- California, Iowa, Kentucky, North Carolina, Texas
- Visit states; talk with presidents, trustees, policy-makers
- Determine challenges, next steps

North Carolina Community Colleges Designated as Rural

- Alamance Community College
- Beaufort County Community College
- Bladen Community College
- Brunswick Community College
- Davidson-Davie Community College
- Edgecombe Community College
- Halifax Community College
- James Sprunt Community College
- Johnston Community College
- Martin Community College
- McDowell Technical Community College
- Montgomery Community College
- Nash Community College
- Pamlico Community College
- Piedmont Community College
- Roanoke-Chowan Community College
- Rockingham Community College
- Sandhills Community College
- South Piedmont Community College
- Southeastern Community College
- Surry Community College
- Tri-County Community College

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Common Challenges

- Access to high-speed, broadband internet
- Funding
- Student Basic Needs—Mental Health

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1. Access to Broadband Internet

- Rural Americans are 15 times more likely to lack broadband access
- FCC = 25 Mbps download; 3 Mbps upload; likely insufficient to stream
- Essential for workforce development in a time of COVID
- The future of economic development in rural America—esp., small businesses, agriculture
- Students in library, fast food parking lots
- Dependence on wireless, cellular—problematic for student success

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Broadband Access Challenges

- 22 states with substantive legal roadblocks to public investment
- North Carolina prevents counties from providing public broadband access
- Private companies have monopoly: unlikely to spend money on fiber infrastructure due to low population density—no profit
- Starlink in remote Eastern North Carolina: satellite Internet access—old technology; Elon Musk won this contract
- Long-term interest in project?

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Broadband Access Solutions

- Fiber optic cable is the best long-term solution: reliable, capacious
- Expensive to lay and requires house-by-house installation but durable—the problem is at the home
- In North Carolina: Wi-Fi hotspots in school buses parked throughout a region
- On top of water towers—Hyde County, Ocracoke, and others
- NC Information Highway Classrooms to outlying schools: USDA grants

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2. Funding

- Declining tax base in counties as populations decline
- Costs are higher at rural community colleges
- Technology costs: synchronous classrooms, simulators
- Student support costs
- Grants are difficult given matching requirements
- Federal grants limited based on federal definition
- Difficulty attracting and retaining talent—salary disparities

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Funding

- Rural community colleges are not “self-sustaining”
- Part of Dallas Herring’s “philosophy of total education; a belief in the incomparable worth of all human beings...We must take people where they are and carry them as far as they can go.”
- Not everyone lives in Wake and Mecklenburg Counties—yet
- The System exists to use funding in order to recognize “the incomparable worth of all human beings”
- Part of taking people “where they are”—not just educationally but geographically

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Student Basic Needs—Mental Health, etc.

- Depression—the epidemic of despair—that is symptomatic in opioid crisis has deepened with COVID pandemic
- Lack of connection to others
- Lack of hope for sustainable, livable wage
- Lack of trained psychiatric and psychological professionals
- Housing
- Transportation
- Basic health care

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Innovations by State: North Carolina

- Teacher shortage in rural areas:
teacher preparation articulation
agreement with UNC System
- Systemic pathways key to
building workforce pipeline
- Hot spot locations in school buses
throughout Hyde County and
others to provide internet access
- Federal, state, local focus on
broad band infrastructure
- Especially through energy and
communication cooperatives

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Innovations by State: Kentucky

- Hazard Community and Technical College's Tuesday Night Live Program
- 2/3 of adults in Perry County lack any postsecondary experience
- Parents attend class; children engage in group activities and help prepare dinner
- Dinner helps destigmatize food insecurity
- After dinner, adult classes resume; children receive assistance with homework

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Innovations by State: Iowa

- Elevate Iowa program
- Collaboration between community colleges and Advanced Manufacturing Association
- Providing scholarships for students
- Welding, industrial maintenance, machining, aviation, industrial automation, robotics

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Innovation by State: California

- Housing insecurity for first-generation students: 43% of cost of attendance
- Built Lotus Living Rise Above tiny homes project for up to 26 homeless students
- City of El Centro, California Dept. of Housing and Community Development
- Owned by the city—avoid regulations
- 55-year lease to Imperial Valley College foundation

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Innovation by State: Texas

- Early College High School: Western Texas College
- P-20 initiative with Roscoe Collegiate Independent School District
- 100% graduation rate
- Montessori model
- No cost for associate degree (dual enrollment)
- Focus on wind energy and drones (world's largest wind farm)

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Recommendations

- Enhance and increase partnerships between colleges, public/private sectors
- Fund new initiatives at the state and federal levels specific to support for rural community colleges
- Strengthen existing programs for the poor (ex., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP))
- Redefine broad band as a public utility
- Legalize municipal broad band
- Expand FCC's E-rate program to rural colleges (currently libraries, K-12)

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Recommendations

- Create a "Rural-Serving Institution" (RSI) designation at the Federal level that includes branch campuses and all counties served, not just the main campus location
- Enable non-Rural-Serving Institutions that serve rural populations to seek waivers to obtain partial RSI designation
- Specifically fund RSI's at the Federal and State levels

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Next Steps

- Convene rural community college leaders in a new nationwide network (at least 55 colleges and 5 tribal colleges)
- Provide technical support, assistance, and information regarding funding opportunities
- Develop a dedicated website through ACCT to relay information specific to rural community colleges

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What Rural Community Colleges Can Teach Us

- Community colleges are the intermediaries between rural and metro—we must translate the broader world for our service regions
- Not everyone is the same: diversity is not just ethnic, it's cultural and socio-economic
- Social bonds between people are critical to the respect for individual human worth—civility, manners, traditions, customs
- Community college mission is not just academic: necessity to serve whole person (health, transportation, housing, childcare)
- Mission must connect to place; place connects to identity for students, faculty, staff
- Declines in population do not preclude enrollment increases

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Some words of wisdom...

“Rats and roaches live by competition under the laws of supply and demand; it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy.”

—Wendell Berry