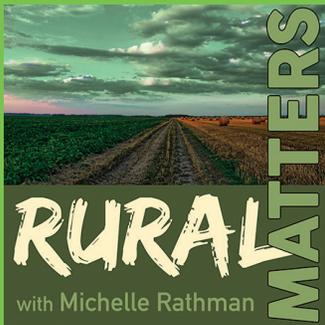


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COVID-19 and Rural Higher Education: Rapid Innovation and Ideas for the Future

West Virginia's Climb: A Statewide Education Collaboration That Centers on Rural Communities

Recognizing Diversity in Rural America: College Access Strategies in Rural Communities of Color

Innovation, Technology, and the Future of Rural Colleges

COVID-19 and Rural Higher Education

Rapid Innovation and Ideas for the Future

Alyssa Ratledge, Hannah Dalporto, and Erika Lewy

SEPTEMBER 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused seismic shifts for postsecondary education. For rural colleges, the pandemic exacerbated issues that have affected students and communities for decades. Education gaps between rural communities and their more urbanized counterparts are well documented. While 41 percent of urban adults have a college degree, only **28 percent of rural adults** do. The college access gap between rural and urban areas is **sizable**: In most states, rural high school students achieve graduation rates similar to urban and suburban counterparts, but their college enrollment rates are much lower.

Rural communities have long been confronted with unique education challenges. Chief among them is the digital divide: Many rural areas lack adequate broadband internet infrastructure, which has become even more critical during the pandemic. Only **63 percent of rural adults** say they have access to the internet at home, compared with 75 percent of urban adults. In areas where internet is available, it can be costly. And students may lack the technology they need to be successful in online learning.

Rural America is not monolithic. Still, a few common themes exist in communities across the country. Many rural areas lack public transportation, and often there are long distances between campuses and social service providers, making access difficult. Many rural colleges have trouble attracting specialized faculty and staff. Similarly, small, rural colleges may not consistently enroll enough students to fill courses or programs every semester. Rural areas are also more likely to have unpredictable labor markets and small businesses are frequently the most common employers, making it difficult for colleges to identify long-term, reliable pathways from degrees to local jobs. In some places, such as historically single-industry small towns, families may express skepticism about the value of higher education. Many communities fear that students who pursue a college degree will ultimately leave to seek better-paying careers elsewhere.

In addition, many rural areas seeing the highest poverty rates and the lowest graduation rates are also dealing with interconnected issues of rural poverty and historical, systemic racism. The marginalization of Black and Indigenous people and other people of color in rural communities over many generations has created broad inequities, compounding a continued lack of investment in these communities.

RIGHT NOW: RAPID ADAPTATIONS AT RURAL INSTITUTIONS

Little research in higher education has been conducted in rural settings. To understand what is working and what research is needed, MDRC convened virtual



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meetings this past spring and summer with a diverse group of rural higher education leaders and stakeholders. The meetings revealed many innovative adaptations that rural educators have been making in response to the pandemic. Many of these strategies may be applicable to all institutions, not just those with a preponderance of rural students.

- **Make courses mobile-friendly:** Several rural colleges discovered that many of their students can only access internet by mobile phone. To help students complete their classes, the schools updated course modules and web pages to be more mobile-friendly. Others listed required technology in the syllabi for fall classes, so students know in advance whether a course will work for them. Marisa Vernon White of Lorain County Community College in Ohio said, “We’re trying to be forthright about the technology that students need, instead of waiting for students to find out that they don’t have the tools to make a course work.”
- **Provide devices to students and families:** Beth Spangler of the Alaska Native Science & Engineering Program described partnerships among colleges, K-12 schools, and nonprofit organizations to provide touch-screen devices to families who might only have one internet-capable device. Several colleges used foundation funding and emergency aid dollars to purchase web cameras and low-cost laptops for students and faculty. As noted by Carmen Lopez of College Horizons in New Mexico, which serves Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students, technology solutions require that federal agencies, states, and school districts meet the treaty obligations of Tribal Nations, which include adequately funding schools and investing in infrastructure.
- **Connect students to the internet:** To help areas with inadequate broadband service, some communities have repurposed unused school buses as mobile hot spots. Jan Miller of the University of West Alabama described a program where buses are driven around the state to provide internet access. Students can even take minicourses in the parking lots.
- **Reinforce a sense of community from afar:** Community-building is vital when students learn online. In rural communities, this can be especially important, as students may be physically isolated already. Regina Sievert of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium notes that strong relationships are a core value for Indigenous people and an essential element of Tribal Colleges that contributes to student success. Replacing in-person campus community events with online office hours and drop-in rooms has been pivotal to Indigenous students’ success in distance education — and for staff engagement, too.

BIG IDEAS FOR THE LONGER-TERM RECOVERY

The experts also offered promising ideas to promote rural equity beyond the pandemic:

Entrepreneurship: Across the country, rural colleges are finding ways to support local entrepreneurs and create effective programs that will generate local jobs. The Appalachian Regional Commission is partnering with rural workforce leaders to launch the Appalachian Entrepreneurship Academy. It aims to help young people who want to stay in the community after college and to assist workers in historically single-industry areas who want to learn new skills. Megan Webb and Thomas Fuhr of Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College say entrepreneurship is a priority at their school, which is helping students think about how technology can be applied to agriculture, tourism, and other local industries.

Telecommuting hubs: Some colleges and communities are considering building telecommuting hubs — coworking spaces that offer broadband and office space — to help graduates stay in their communities while pursuing high-wage remote work. Chuck Terrell, president of Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College, noted that his county is just two hours from Washington, DC. Being able to support graduates who qualify for federal jobs but want to stay local could be a game changer for rural economies. Robin McGill of the Alabama Commission on Higher Edu-

cation highlighted Remote Shoals, a remote worker relocation program in northern Alabama that offers incentives to workers to move to these communities. With the shift to teleworking due to the pandemic, more jobs may be partially or fully remote long-term. Telecommuting strategies could level the playing field for attracting and retaining local talent.

Expansion of dual enrollment: Experts in nearly every state the team spoke to identified rural equity in dual enrollment as a priority for improving college access. Rural high school students take dual enrollment courses at lower rates compared with their urban and suburban counterparts. As a result, they start out behind their peers in college credit accumulation. Enrolling in dual enrollment courses during high school may also strengthen students' connections to their local community colleges. Joseph Thiel of the Montana University System (MSU) reported that a new state policy to offer two free dual-enrollment courses to students statewide has had a positive effect on closing income-based enrollment gaps.

Avoiding school closures: The already tenuous financial position of rural colleges has deepened during the pandemic. Montana is exploring multi-campus collaborations and innovative connections with employer associations to help local colleges remain sustainable. MSU's Thiel noted that in Montana, as in many states with low population density, "If rural campuses eliminate programs, the next nearest program might be four or five hours away." School closures also have workforce impacts. Jan Miller said that in her Alabama county, the university is the largest employer, so staying afloat keeps the community healthy economically.

Remote or hybrid faculty positions: Often rural communities fear losing their younger generation forever when they seek out higher education programs only offered in urban areas. But it's a challenge to attract faculty with expertise in high-demand fields who are better remunerated elsewhere. Mark Hagerott, chancellor of the North Dakota University System, suggested state policy could help rural institutions compete by supporting joint appointments and shared professorships. Professors could go between campuses from semester to semester, provide professional development to local faculty, and partner with businesses to meet specialized local workforce training needs. This, in turn, may induce more faculty and young people to stay in — or move to — rural communities.

Building capacity for data analysis: Many organizations, from small colleges to national intermediaries like the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU), want to use evidence to tackle the issues they already know exist. Sheila Martin, a vice president at APLU, shared some questions to help illuminate rural higher education: *What do rural students in higher ed want to achieve and what are their primary barriers? Are they hoping to come back to a rural area? How might we better connect them to rural employers?* Emily House of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission said many of the financial aid/college access programs operated by the state, including Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect, would be more effective if they better understood the large-scale and individual implications for college match.

SUPPORTING RURAL INSTITUTIONS AND STUDENTS

MDRC is committed to including more rural communities in its research. To begin, we invite you to join us in a learning exchange of higher education institutions that serve and are located in rural communities. This learning exchange has two goals: to help geographically distant practitioners connect with each other about innovative solutions, and to elevate promising interventions nationally to build evidence that will benefit all rural students. Join us in strengthening and supporting rural higher education. Contact Alyssa Ratledge at alyssa.ratledge@mdrc.org.

DECEMBER 2020

WEST VIRGINIA'S CLIMB

ALYSSA RATLEDGE

A Statewide Education Collaboration That Centers on Rural Communities

MDRC, Ascendium Education Group, and Rural Matters partnered to present a four-part audio series called “Rural Higher Education: Challenges & Opportunities,” which aired on the [Rural Matters podcast](#). This supplementary paper summarizes Part II of the series.

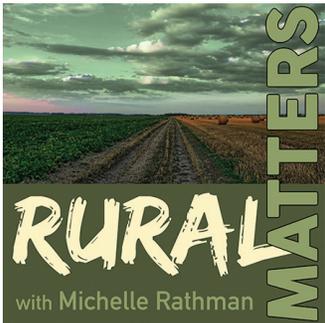
In 2018, West Virginia higher education leaders set an ambitious goal: Ensure that 60 percent of the state’s working-age adults have [postsecondary credentials by 2030](#). Why is this so ambitious? As of 2016, fewer than one-third of West Virginians had an associate’s degree or higher. Competing in the modern economy [increasingly requires a postsecondary education](#). And for many West Virginia communities, a college degree can be a stepping-stone out of poverty.

WHAT IS WEST VIRGINIA’S CLIMB?

[West Virginia’s Climb](#) is a campaign to improve college degree attainment across the state, from cities and towns to rural communities up and down the Appalachian Mountains. Including rural areas has been a key element of the campaign since its inception: Many of the state’s lowest-income and most rural counties are also those with the lowest levels of educational attainment. West Virginia’s Climb includes five strategies:

- 1. Educational resources:** Offer freely accessible, openly licensed textbooks for a wide variety of courses to dramatically reduce students’ textbook costs.
- 2. Emergency aid grants:** Provide small stipends, usually in the range of a few hundred dollars, for students potentially derailed by an emergency expense such as a car repair.
- 3. Tools of the trade:** Give grants to students in workforce programs where the tools necessary to participate can be prohibitively expensive, such as welding equipment.
- 4. Advising:** Provide schools with financial support for additional advising interventions and support, with a focus on rural students’ unique needs.
- 5. Student-facing services:** Assess services like enrollment and financial aid — essential connections for students trying to enroll in and persist in college — to identify institution-wide improvements and customer service strategies that better meet student needs.

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WHY THESE STRATEGIES?

[Research has shown](#) that a number of short-term interventions can help low-income college students succeed. Providing financial support for expenses not fully covered by financial aid such as textbooks, tools, and transportation can help students stay enrolled in college semester to semester. Offering emergency aid for small, one-time expenses such as a car repair or last-minute babysitting is a low-cost way for colleges to keep students on track. Improving advising and other campus services to provide students with additional, personalized support — for example, by reducing advisors’ case-loads and by using insights from behavioral science when contacting students about school requirements — has also been shown to improve students’ likelihood of reenrolling. Advising interventions such as these are especially effective, research shows, when they are combined with other services and financial supports to help students navigate multiple issues simultaneously.

Strategies like these have been widely studied in low-income and first-generation college populations. But in West Virginia, the additional dimension of students’ rurality has meant having to customize the interventions to suit local needs. For example, colleges can partner with nonprofits to provide services on campus that rural students might otherwise have to travel long distances to access, such as childcare or mental health counselling. Schools can also provide internet access for students whose homes do not have broadband. The West Virginia government has already instituted a “last dollar” [financial aid program](#) for many two-year college programs in which the state covers any gaps between students’ federal financial aid and tuition and fees. West Virginia’s Climb takes the next step to ensure that students’ needs beyond tuition are met, too.

HOW DID WEST VIRGINIA’S CLIMB COME TOGETHER?

In 2018, the Education Funders Affinity Group of [Philanthropy West Virginia](#), a statewide network of grantmakers, met to discuss and prioritize ways in which members could collaborate to improve college graduation rates in the state. From there, the group broadened its effort, engaging the [West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission](#) as well as representatives from colleges, state agencies, nonprofits, the private sector, and local community members at an education summit. Building trust and identifying common goals among the diverse group of stakeholders was critical to the success of the effort, participants said. Doing this in advance meant that when national philanthropic partners came onboard to move West Virginia’s Climb forward, the group had already identified local needs and community members felt heard, trusted, and connected.

The discussions reflected the participants’ belief that rural equity matters. Making sure that representatives from rural communities, nonprofits, student groups, and schools were full partners was essential, participants said, because they represented some of the highest-need areas in the state. As a practical matter, this meant colleges inviting their local industries and nonprofit partners to participate, students identifying their greatest needs via student surveys, and foundations of all sizes pooling their resources into larger funds to build collective capacity. That way, the participants con-

cluded, rural lived experiences and community needs would be baked into policy prescriptions from the start.

HOW CAN YOU TRY THIS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Start by assessing students' needs. If tuition is paid for, as it is in West Virginia, but textbooks and supplies are not and may be unaffordable for students with low incomes, add financial support to cover those costs. If enrollment rates are low, revise the new-student experience and improve essential student-facing services like advising, to address the reasons people are dropping out. From there, identify partners outside of the local college who can support the intervention further — through advocacy, funding, or in other ways.

Involve local community leaders in the design and implementation of a new program. Rural colleges may not have the means to sustain programs long-term by themselves — even when the programs work. That means state agencies, philanthropies, and researchers should include local partners from education and industry in intervention design and consider long-term engagement, to ensure their efforts are relevant, effective, and sustainable.

Higher education in sparsely populated rural areas has been historically underfunded. But because dollars can go further in rural communities, the potential for scaling up customized interventions is greater. West Virginia's Climb offers a promising blueprint.

For more information about West Virginia's Climb contact:

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And check out the [Rural Matters Podcast](#) to learn more about this and other innovative programs serving rural communities.

DECEMBER 2020

ALYSSA RATLEDGE

RECOGNIZING DIVERSITY IN RURAL AMERICA

College Access Strategies in Rural Communities of Color

MDRC, Ascendium Education Group, and Rural Matters partnered to present a four-part audio series called “Rural Higher Education: Challenges & Opportunities,” which aired on the [Rural Matters podcast](#). This supplementary paper summarizes Part III of the series.

Rural America is not monolithic. Despite common perceptions about homogenous, white rural populations, there’s great diversity in rural regions across the country. Nationwide, [15 to 20 percent](#) of rural residents identify as people of color or nonwhite. In some areas the percentage is much higher — and growing. This isn’t new: There are rural counties in southern states that are predominantly Black and have been so for hundreds of years. Large portions of the Southwest are predominantly Latino, including some communities that predate American statehood. Tribal lands in Hawaii, Alaska, the Southwest, and the Mountain West have been home to Native and Indigenous people for 15,000 years.

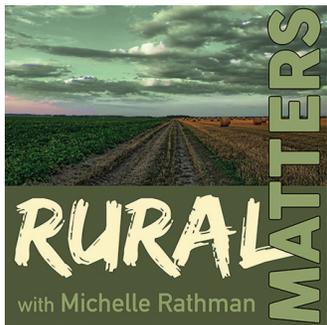
Rural communities face distinct educational challenges. Rural students’ college enrollment and completion rates [remain low compared with their urban and suburban peers](#). Black, Latino, and Native students [are less likely to enroll in college](#) compared with White students.

This paper (and the podcast on which it is based) features the scholarship of three experts on issues facing rural communities of color: Noel Harmon of Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholars (APIA), Ed Smith-Lewis of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), and Deborah Santiago of Excelencia in Education. It offers some considerations for rural higher education professionals who are trying to improve college-going and college-graduation rates and to address equity and inclusion issues in their communities.

ADAPTING STRATEGIES FOR LOCAL CULTURAL NEEDS

Ms. Harmon suggests convening “communities of practice” so stakeholders can share experiences and thoughtfully approach how to adapt to local needs. In Hawaii, for example, where Native Hawaiians were historically excluded from educational institutions, a sense of exclusion still lingers, Ms. Harmon says. Bringing the Native community back into the education decision-making process and validating requests such as instruction in Hawaiian has helped build trust between students and college administrators. Hawaiian community colleges have also built their own student support programs. The [Paepae ‘Ōhūa Native Hawaiian Success Center](#), for example, offers cultural bridge workshops, cultural ceremonies, and community mentoring, in addition to evidence-based student success strategies such as academic advising, financial supports, and peer study groups.

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In Mississippi, statewide rural business development funds have special set-asides to invest in historically Black colleges and universities, to build up entrepreneurship in southern Black communities, Mr. Smith Lewis says. [Similar legislation](#) to support rural communities has been introduced at the federal level.

INCLUDING LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOLUTIONS

Educational strategies that consider the local context, needs, and desires of students are getting increasing attention. Advocates and college staff alike agree that for rural communities, it is essential to include community leaders, parents, and students in conversations about new interventions from the beginning, to identify barriers and potential solutions. This process ensures that the solutions developed have salience and relevance and appeal to the students and families they serve. This is especially important for communities of color, who often report feeling sidelined or patronized in education reform conversations. Including their perspective and then acting on it changes that dynamic, Mr. Smith-Lewis says. It's about demonstrating the applications for student success to the community, he says, "not learning for the sake of learning."

PILOTING STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT THE NONTRADITIONAL OR "POST-TRADITIONAL" COLLEGE STUDENT

Each year, fewer and fewer college students fit the model of the "traditional" 18-year-old college student who lives on campus, attends school full-time, is supported financially by parents, and has no significant external obligations such as children or employment. Ms. Santiago calls many rural students of color "post-traditional": They are often older, commute into college each day from a long distance, may have family or child care responsibilities, and are almost always working at least part time. Rural colleges are developing unique supports to serve them. For instance, some colleges offer alternative course schedules that accommodate the seasonality of local industries such as farming, with breaks purposely scheduled during harvest weeks when students are unavailable for classes. Other colleges help students in distant parts of their catchment area connect with other students through carpooling agreements and provide gas money for drivers, so far-flung students can share the physical and financial burden of driving to campus.

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING FACULTY MEMBERS OF COLOR

Many colleges are testing out ways to improve diversity efforts in faculty hiring and retention. For example, some colleges have changed their recruitment strategies to target Ph.D. programs that graduate more people of color from rural states, as those graduates may be more likely to take jobs in a rural area. To improve retention rates, some colleges have worked with community organizations to understand the racial climate in their town or county, with the goal of enhancing the quality of life for faculty members of color and their families. All three panelists agree that while faculty retention in rural areas can be an extra challenge, even incremental improvements can make a difference for students of color looking for mentors.

ADDRESSING FEARS OF “BRAIN DRAIN” OR OUTMIGRATION

Rural students of color often share that they faced skepticism from their families and communities when they said they wanted to go to college. There could be several reasons for this. Families may want their children to enter industries that have long been mainstays in their area, such as agriculture or mining. They may not see the value of higher education or the connection to 21st-century jobs, even fearing their children will face the same racism and exclusion in academia that past generations did. Perhaps most prominent across the country, however, is the fear that students who get a college degree will leave in search of better-paying jobs far from home — a rational concern given [the modern history of outmigration from rural states](#). All three panelists say colleges and community organizations are working to address these concerns. They are drawing attention to the wider variety of careers available in the modern economy, even in rural areas, such as computer programming jobs that can be performed remotely. They are also educating students about changing local workforce needs, such as agriculture and manufacturing jobs that are increasingly relying on high-tech skills.

THINKING OF RURAL STUDENTS’ EDUCATIONAL GOALS AS COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Worries about rural outmigration can also be offset by changing students’ views of their education. The panelists note that in many rural communities of color, the dream of a college degree is not just for students’ own goals but for their families and communities, too. Federal data show that rural young people are more likely [to return](#) to [rural communities](#) after time spent in a city for family and lifestyle reasons, as well as to bring ideas and business back home. Reframing the conversation to consider educational attainment as part of local economic development can help expand families’ perceptions of the value of a local college education and the careers available in their community. For tight-knit communities of color, this cultural context may support college-going rates.

DISAGGREGATING DATA (ESPECIALLY FOR OVERLOOKED DEMOGRAPHICS)

Lack of reliable data on rural student outcomes continues to be an issue for college administrators trying to improve retention and graduation rates. At the same time, in many communities, the inability to disaggregate data masks disparities. Ms. Harmon notes that there is so little disaggregated data on Asian and Pacific Islander students that oftentimes, these underserved populations are not even noticed: When national data show that Asian Americans have high college-going rates, for example, the lack of statistics broken out by racial or ethnic subgroups means that lower college-going rates of groups like Native Hawaiians aren’t visible. Similarly, Native American and Alaska Native education outcomes often aren’t reported in the first place, making these groups invisible to practitioners and policymakers who would otherwise want to help them.

In addition to race and ethnicity, rural colleges may want to break out academic outcomes by distance from the school, as this is a common barrier to success. Colleges can start by simply asking students how far their commute to campus is. Being able to disaggregate data can help identify

achievement disparities and elucidate ways to bring students up to parity with their higher-achieving counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Researchers are only beginning to understand the confluence of race and rurality. Many rural colleges are looking for ways to boost college enrollment and graduation rates, especially among groups who historically have been shut out of equal access and who continue to face academic and economic disparities. The ideas presented in this paper offer a jumping-off point for higher education professionals and policymakers as they strive to develop culturally relevant programs and strategies to serve rural students of color.

For more information:

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Check out the [Rural Matters](#) podcast to learn more about innovative programs serving rural communities.

DECEMBER 2020

ALYSSA RATLEDGE

INNOVATION, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE FUTURE OF RURAL COLLEGES

MDRC, Ascendium Education Group, and Rural Matters partnered to present a four-part audio series called “Rural Higher Education: Challenges & Opportunities,” which aired on the [Rural Matters podcast](#). This supplementary paper summarizes Part IV of the series.

As the United States grapples with the recession caused by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, the economic fragility of rural areas looms large. Many rural counties were slow to recover [from the 2008 recession](#), in contrast with most American cities, where employment and economic growth rates recovered relatively quickly. The United States Department of Agriculture identifies [three main reasons](#) for this disparity in rural areas: an older population, a higher proportion of the population with disabilities, and lower levels of education. This paper presents considerations for rural colleges grappling with financial stability and how to improve education attainment rates.

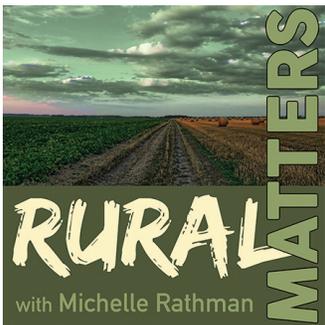
WHY COLLEGES ARE CRITICAL TO RURAL ECONOMIC HEALTH

In many rural areas, the local college is the center of the community: It is the primary source of education and job training for residents; a cultural hub offering arts and sporting events; a hotspot for broadband internet access; and, sometimes, the area’s largest employer. When a rural region has few other large institutions, the local college takes on even greater importance.

Many rural communities do not have [sufficient internet access](#), for example, a critical need that has only grown in importance given the expanding sector of remote work due to the pandemic; [according to the FCC](#), 80 percent of U.S. households without high-speed internet are located in rural areas. Some rural colleges have led the way in broadband development by lobbying state and local agencies to extend infrastructure to their campuses. Other colleges have partnered with local nonprofits and utilities to apply for federal grants to build infrastructure in their towns. Combining forces can give rural communities that lack the fundraising staff or know-how a chance to compete for these kinds of funds.

One rural Maryland community identified a local need for highly trained commercial truck drivers to complete complex last-mile deliveries. The local community college had not previously offered this training, as the cost of the trucks was prohibitively expensive. The college worked with its state rural development council through [Partners for Rural America](#) to purchase trucks so it could offer the training to fill this workforce need. The college also rented the trucks to community members who had a commercial license. This

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both supported start-up entrepreneurship for several residents and allowed the college to partially recoup the cost of purchasing the trucks.

HOW RURAL COLLEGES CAN MAXIMIZE INNOVATION IN THE TECHNOLOGY SECTOR

Some rural colleges have successfully used a hybrid online and in-person model for workforce training programs, in fields such as computer science and solar energy engineering. Students take a combination of online courses and periodic in-person training sessions with a professor or an industry professional who regularly travels to the area. This and other pilot models are being tested by the [Education Design Lab](#), a nonprofit that designs postsecondary learning models. The goal is to expand education and workforce training programs in rural areas, with a focus on 21st-century jobs.

Developing computer science jobs, many of which can be performed remotely, has become a popular rural economic development strategy — especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Capitalizing on flexible middle- and high-wage jobs is one strategy to improve rural communities' long-term stability, especially if the shift to remote work is long-lasting. [The Center on Rural Innovation](#) suggests a few ideas for building an ecosystem that supports the creation of these jobs. One idea is to create specialized mentoring programs featuring local community members with niche skillsets; faculty and faculty spouses, for example, are often an untapped resource. Another idea is to ensure that local building codes allow for coworking spaces, to support remote workers and start-up entrepreneurs, as well as apartment housing for young professionals, who may then be more likely to stay in the local community.

A common fear in rural communities is that once students earn a college degree, they will leave home for higher-paying jobs in urban areas. To address these concerns, some colleges are focusing on training for cross-industry occupations such as IT support. That way, local hospitals and manufacturers that are currently outsourcing those jobs can hire local workers instead. Repositioning existing employers as tech employers can help colleges identify and promote a tech-focused segment of the local economy.

KEEPING RURAL COLLEGES FINANCIALLY STABLE

Innovation isn't just about program development. Today's rural colleges must also think creatively about their own financial stability. [Multiple studies](#) have [shown](#) that over the last few decades, states have sharply decreased their investment in public colleges. This has left most schools, especially two-year colleges, struggling with decisions about which programs, majors, and support services to keep or cut to stay afloat.

Rural colleges' level of public investment, which varies from state to state, is often driven by state funding formulas that put a premium on total student enrollment — something that smaller institutions typically cannot increase significantly. The State Higher Education Executive Officers Associa-

tion recommends that education leaders, agencies, and legislators consider other metrics for funding. These might include community use of campus infrastructure, training programs at community colleges that lead to industry credentials but are not currently eligible for financial aid, and even business license applications that reflect entrepreneurship initiatives. Such metrics may also be of interest to other state agencies that have not historically partnered with rural colleges but now see potential for alignment. These agencies include natural resource development and agriculture departments, which work with industries that have become much more technology-dependent in recent years and are increasingly seeking employees with credentials. These efforts can also build trust among community members who are affected by the economic changes that the agricultural and manufacturing industries have undergone in many parts of the country.

The drastic shifts in college enrollment, programming, and remote work caused by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic have prompted many rural colleges to look for innovative solutions. Building on these innovations for a more sustainable future for the colleges — and for their communities — is a challenge they're ready to tackle in 2021 and beyond.

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