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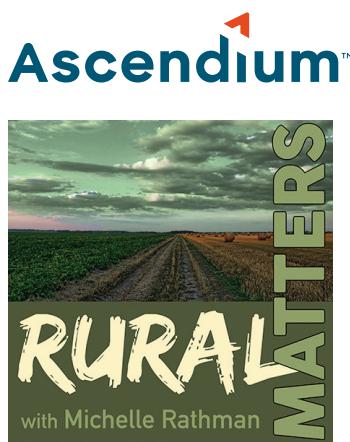
both supported start-up entrepreneurship for several residents and allowed the college to partially recoup the cost of purchasing the trucks.

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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And check out the Rural Matters Podcast to learn more about these and other innovative programs serving rural communities.