



Paper No. 8

## Planting the Seeds, Working the Land: Postsecondary Programs in Rural Areas

BY BENNETT G. BOGGS

Rural America is challenged. Hampered by an aging and shrinking population, it trails urban areas in the portion of people who hold postsecondary degrees. This condition is often aggravated when rural young people seeking postsecondary credentials leave their communities—often referred to as “rural brain drain”—to attend postsecondary institutions, and perhaps not returning as they seek employment after earning their credential or degrees. The consequences for the economic vitality of the rural communities and states are significant. Consider the following:

- According to a study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, almost 68% of rural counties lost population between 2010 and 2016 and only 7% grew by more than 5%.

### About this series

With the support of the Arnold Ventures, this is the last of eight briefs published by NCSL as “A Legislator’s Toolkit to the New World of Higher Education.” The series seeks to inform legislators about current challenges to public postsecondary education so that they can form cohesive, strategic approaches to building effective and efficient postsecondary systems responsive to future statewide economic and community needs. In addition, an [interactive database](#) on the NCSL website identifies state approaches to governance, funding and affordability, allowing policymakers to share information, exchange ideas and adopt the best practices for their state’s particular needs.

- Since 2000, the number prime-age workers employed in rural areas declined by 11% while urban and suburban numbers rose.
- Furthermore, the college attainment gap between rural and urban populations has increased nearly three-fold, from 4.8% in 1970 to 14% in 2015.
- Individuals in rural communities are less likely to have postsecondary credentials—and less likely to be employed.

The economic and community challenges facing rural areas are real. Since the Great Recession, Americans in rural areas have been left behind in both [income](#) and [health](#). And research reveals that a college education is [linked](#) to better pay, stronger employment and enhanced overall well-being.

For the economic vitality and well-being of rural communities, states are seeking ways to strengthen postsecondary opportunities there. However, the challenges and barriers are genuine and need to be understood.

## Challenges and Barriers

The barriers to improving postsecondary opportunity and attainment in rural communities can be addressed primarily by meeting geographic, cultural and financial challenges.

### GEOGRAPHIC BARRIERS

When choosing colleges, location matters to students. This factor is often underestimated. In 2014, nearly 60% of incoming students [chose](#) a college less than 50 miles from their homes—a trend that has held true [since the 1980s](#). This can be even more important for the nearly 25% of the nation’s undergraduates who are considered [nontraditional](#)—older students who are working full time, attending college part time and may be balancing child care responsibilities.

For rural communities, this dilemma is more pronounced. Regions where postsecondary opportunities are unavailable or extremely limited to place-bound students are known as [education deserts](#). In these areas—where the nearest postsecondary institution is more than 25 miles away—12.8% of adults live below the poverty line. That percentage falls to 11.4% if an institution is closer than 25 miles. The magnitude of this challenge is significant. According to [research](#) by the Urban Institute, nearly 41 million Americans live in an education desert. Of those, 75% live in rural communities and are [20% less likely](#) to complete a postsecondary degree than those with easier access.

### CULTURAL CHALLENGES

Distance may be as much a cultural challenge as a geographical one. For men, there is often a sense that it is one’s duty to be [the primary provider](#) for their families—and taking time to attend college will delay or reduce earnings in the near-term. In response, institutions can promote the long-term view of education as an investment that leads to better work and income. In addition, academic and credentialing programs can show clear and efficient pathways to completion and provide sufficient financial aid and scholarships.



Also related to culture, rural students are often [reluctant to leave](#) their homes—and their parents are often concerned their children will never return. Rural communities are often tight communities, where generations of families have an established sense of identity and belonging. The sense of closeness and responsibility within the community lead many to ask whether leaving—even to better oneself and improve one’s employability—is shunning one’s duty to the greater community good.

## **FINANCIAL CHALLENGES**

Student loan debt also adds to the difficulties—and data can prove reluctant parents correct. According to a [study](#) by the U.S. Federal Reserve, individuals with student loan debt are less likely to remain in rural areas. Only 52% of student loan borrowers in rural areas still reside in their home communities six years later. Additionally, those with the highest debt are more likely to leave. And—using debt reduction as a measure—those who do relocate to urban areas fare better than those who remain in rural areas.

With these challenges in mind, state and postsecondary leaders can better understand the importance of proximity and financial aid to postsecondary opportunities for rural communities. Efforts can be made to better communicate how postsecondary attainment is connected to economic opportunity and stronger community development. With innovative state support, postsecondary institutions can improve access for underserved areas through multi-institutional partnerships and transfer agreements, aggressive rural recruitment, enhanced technology and broadband services. For state legislators, it is often an issue of targeted investment with clear expectations of how their postsecondary institutions are to help.

## **How Colleges and Universities Can Help**

Public colleges and universities can play direct roles in drawing more rural students into postsecondary education. They can partner with rural K-12 school districts to recruit more students and also help strengthen academic programs to “build pathways” for rural students and better prepare them for postsecondary work.

## **RECRUIT AND ENROLL MORE RURAL STUDENTS**

One way for more rural students to participate in postsecondary education is for more colleges and universities to recruit them. It is that simple—and that difficult. Colleges rarely send recruiters to rural high schools for two reasons. First, it often is not cost-effective. Recruiters can see many more students in one day and at less expense in urban and suburban communities. Also, [rural students often come from low-income families](#) and therefore require more institutional [financial aid](#). Many public universities often face difficult decisions on how to spend limited resources as they consider their admissions travel budgets. Second, as mentioned above, students from rural communities are often reluctant to leave home, and their parents are often concerned their children will never return. This is not lost on admissions officials allocating their travel time and resources.

However, these challenges can be overcome with an institutional approach of enlightened self-interest and institutional incentives. Many colleges are noting the [shrinking population of traditional college students](#) and realize they must broaden recruitment to achieve their student enrollment goals. They also note the need for greater diversity among their students, and that includes students from rural America. State lawmakers can incorporate enrollments and graduation rates from rural regions as part of postsecondary outcomes-based appropriation models to help reward institutions for seeking and enrolling more rural students. Rural K-12 school districts from neighboring counties also can help by organizing regional college fairs in district community or civic centers.

## **BUILD PATHWAYS FOR RURAL K-12 STUDENTS**

Overcoming the reluctance of families to encourage their children to attend college is a difficult task. Universities can help by forming active partnerships with K-12 school districts and sending professors to the schools to speak on relevant topics. This can be in keeping with—and build upon—[public land-grant universities’](#) history of [extension service](#) to agricultural communities. It can help ensure that institutional names are familiar in the community and viewed as a positive partner addressing community needs. Campus visits by middle and high school students for various events can also help to ease the cultural divide.

More directly, public colleges and universities can collaborate with rural school districts to strengthen academic programs. For example, the University of Iowa College of Education is [assisting](#) 10 rural K-12 schools in strengthening STEM classes for gifted students. Through its Belin-Blank Center, the college created the [STEM Excellence and Leadership Program](#) with funds from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and the National Science Foundation. The 10 schools receive extra funds to provide additional tutorial time for the students, purchase science equipment and software, and bring their students to the University of Iowa campus for a tour—allowing rural students to think about attending college much earlier, meet and form connections with faculty and older students, and see that college is truly a possibility.

Similarly, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology offers a [variety of programs](#) to K-12 schools through its School of Science, including a week-long summer program for economically disadvantaged middle school students. The intent is to inspire them in the STEM fields and to see that college is possible. A second program focuses on middle and high school girls and math. Other programs involve free summer research projects with MIT graduate students.

Jobs for the Future [found](#) that colleges and rural high schools in Ohio, Tennessee and Texas formed successful partnerships in areas such as dual enrollment, transition courses and college success programs. These efforts demystify college campuses for rural K-12 students and open channels of better communication and information in terms of available student support and financial aid.

These efforts can be undertaken in various ways by all postsecondary institutions within a state—flagship research universities, comprehensive universities, private colleges, and community and technical colleges. However, public comprehensive universities and community and technical colleges have distinct roles to play in addressing rural needs as part of their institutional missions.

## Comprehensive Universities

Located throughout the state and with a mission to address regional economic and community needs, public comprehensive universities are situated to serve rural areas. These universities fill the niche between the public flagship research university and local community colleges. Approximately 70% of the nation’s undergraduates pursuing four-year degrees attend these universities—making them the nation’s university workhorses. Furthermore, they enroll higher percentages of first-generation, black, Hispanic and adult (age 25 and above) students. And the value of these universities to their service sectors is clear: [Research](#) shows that more than half of low-income students who attend these universities reach the top half of the nation’s income earners by their 30s.



Serving their regions of the state, comprehensive universities generally accept between 75% and 85% of their applicants. Their students are generally drawn from geographically nearby counties and are preparing for jobs in the local and regional economy. Comprehensive universities’ colleges of education often serve as the teacher pipeline for regional K-12 school districts. With strong regional identities, geographical proximity that can allow rural students to often visit home on weekends, and access to rural K-12 schools through their educator/teacher alumni, comprehensive universities are well positioned to serve rural communities and strengthen rural economic development.

## Community and Technical Colleges

While comprehensive universities play a notable role, [research](#) by the Association of Community College Trustees shows that community colleges are the primary source of postsecondary education in rural communities. Of the 381 rural postsecondary institutions across the nation, 218 are public community and technical colleges that enroll 78% of the 1.1 million undergraduates who attend rural institutions. In many



rural areas, community colleges are the only geographically available option and create a direct connection to the regional labor market. These colleges provide programs by which students can transfer to a four-year institution or earn credentials necessary for enhanced local employment. These institutions also can help students identify employment opportunities and form basic professional and personal networks for support and advancement.

Due to their significant role, it is important that community colleges perform well. There are several strategies community and technical colleges can take to strengthen their services and opportunities in rural communities. These include:

- Bring the college closer to students' home and work. Provide remote classrooms or online course options to those challenged to attend on a main campus.
- Conduct effective outreach. Intentionally recruit rural students through a variety of methods, including local and social media and faith-based and civic organizations.
- Ensure students have access to all available resources. Make sure students are connected to available academic, social and financial support and resources. Make those resources known and easy to access via a "one-stop" contact.
- Partner with high schools to create a seamless postsecondary education pipeline. Develop dual-credit programs and other opportunities where rural students sense a seamless continuation into post-high school education.
- Increase internship and apprenticeship opportunities to help students develop career-focused skills. Typical rural industries have relied on farming, manufacturing and health care which now involve rapidly changing technologies. Involving students early with hands-on opportunities allows them to better understand and become comfortable with the real life needs of those jobs.
- Create programs targeted to local needs. Partner with local industries so that workforce preparation programs are adequate and timely. This will demonstrate to students the immediate application of their learning as well as strengthen local economies.

## Innovative Consortiums

In some rural areas, even a community college may be more than 25 miles away. In those cases, online courses and programs can often provide a [workable option](#). With the ability to provide flexible scheduling and remove the need for travel, online learning can also help students who need to balance other life responsibilities such as work or child care. However, online programs are not a silver bullet because many rural areas still lack access to high-speed internet service. Relying completely on online courses also raises questions as to [overall education quality and adequate engagement](#) with course instructors. So, while online learning can be part of the solution, it cannot be the only one.

Another innovative solution being tried among more isolated rural communities are "higher education centers." These inventive hubs are lean and limited cost-efficient satellite locations through which existing colleges or universities can offer hybrid online and in-person instruction without building a campus. In some locales, they may offer occupational training aligned with local industry, along with more traditional academic programs. Centers are often located at the local high school for evening classes or in commercial offices or even in refurbished warehouses or factories. The purpose is to provide a place where students gather for online courses, along with an occasional in-person class with an instructor.

One of the regions experimenting with this model is rural northern Pennsylvania. In 2014, the legislature [authorized](#) the "rural regional college" initiative to bring postsecondary access to an area encompassing 7,000 square miles over nine counties. The [Northern Pennsylvania Regional College](#) (NPRC) was formed in 2017 with a budget of \$1.2 million (now increased to \$5 million for the next three years). The NPRC is actually a consortium of six different hubs, or mini-campuses, throughout the region, along with "classrooms"



that use available space in local high schools, public libraries and other community buildings. The NPRC does not grant degrees, but only provides the infrastructure by which other accredited institutions offer hybrid online and in-person programs. The physical presence offers two benefits that strictly online programs do not. First, it gives students who do not have broadband internet in their homes access to online learning. Second, by requiring students to attend classes together, it provides a structure and positive peer pressure to stay on schedule and be successful.

In Virginia, the [Southern Virginia Higher Education Center \(SVHEC\)](#) occupies two renovated tobacco warehouses in rural South Boston. It partners with Longwood University and Danville Community College to offer classes and occupational training in welding, IT, nursing and advanced manufacturing. The center was established in 1986 in a 500-square-foot trailer. It now has 100,000 square feet of well-purposed space to meet local workforce preparation needs as well as provide adaptable space to experiment in new industries such as recyclable wine barrel construction for Virginia wineries. Similarly, in Maryland, the [Southern Maryland Higher Education Center](#) offers courses from 10 different institutions, including the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins University.

Tennessee offers a slightly different model. The Supporting Postsecondary Access in Rural Communities (SPARC) [initiative](#) provides small grants to existing community colleges in distressed counties to allow instructors to travel and provide dual credit workforce training in partnership with county high schools. The county-focused grants have enabled rural counties to facilitate communication among colleges and regional universities, local farms and industries. This clarifies workforce shortages and cultivates long-term economic opportunities and plans.

Regardless of adaptations, these higher education centers offer innovative approaches to providing programs that are affordable and convenient for rural students. Many also have policies that allow “partial completer” students who have dropped out of previous programs to apply previously gained academic credit toward a credential or degree. Furthermore, these centers have the capacity to work with local high schools on dual enrollment programs to encourage rural students to continue their studies and gain a postsecondary credential or start a pathway to a degree while remaining close to home.

Perhaps best of all, to be truly successful these innovative approaches require open communication among postsecondary institutions, local high schools, farmers, rural businesses and industries to find local solutions to local challenges. In addition to providing postsecondary access to rural students, these centers directly enhance rural economic and workforce development by connecting established postsecondary agricultural, veterinarian, and advanced manufacturing and technology programs to local communities in cost-efficient ways.

## How State Legislatures Are Responding

Over the past few years, state legislatures' recognition of the need for expanded postsecondary opportunities in rural areas has been coupled with concern for workforce shortages in health care and education, among other fields. Below are examples of legislation reflecting these concerns. The first section offers examples of financial and student loan debt reduction incentives to address workforce shortages in rural communities. The second section provides examples of innovative efforts to increase rural educational opportunities.

### Student Loan Forgiveness Legislation – Rural

Year	State	Bill	Title/Summary	Status <sup>1</sup>
2019	AR	<a href="#">H 1841</a>	Creates the osteopathic rural medical practice student loan and scholarship; creates the osteopathic rural medical practice student loan and scholarship board.	Enacted
	IA	<a href="#">H 784</a>	Provides for loan repayment under the rural Iowa primary care loan repayment program to physicians who are national guard members and practice full time, in service commitment areas.	Pending (Carryover to 2020 session)
	KS	<a href="#">S 125</a>	Extending the eligible time period for rural opportunity zones loan repayment program and income tax credit.	Pending (Carryover to 2020 session)
	KS	<a href="#">H 2312</a>	Establishes the rural revitalization student loan repayment program.	Pending (Carryover to 2020 session)
	NY	<a href="#">SB 4838</a>	Establishes the Rural Teacher Education Loan Repayment Program; provides payment for the undergraduate and graduate education loans of teachers in rural school districts who agree to teach in rural areas for at least five years.	Pending
	NY	<a href="#">S 1200</a>	Relates to creating the New York state rural doctors and nurses loan forgiveness program to attract doctors and nurses to be employed in rural areas throughout New York state on a full-time basis.	Pending
2018	IL	<a href="#">H 5109</a>	Creates the Community Behavioral Health Care Professional Loan Repayment Program, provides that the program shall provide loan assistance, subject to appropriation, to eligible mental health and substance use professionals practicing in a community mental health center in an underserved or rural federally designated Mental Health Professional Shortage Area.	Enacted

<sup>1</sup> As of June 2019

	WA	<a href="#">H 2143</a>	Provides for a medical student loan program to increase the physician workforce in rural areas, establishes the program must be funded exclusively with private funding for the purpose of providing medical student loans, provides state funding may be used for the administration of the program.	Enacted
2017	CO	<a href="#">H 1282</a>	Creates the Rural Veterinary Education Loan Repayment Program for veterinarians who agree to practice or up to four years in a rural area of the state that is experiencing a shortage of veterinarians.	Enacted
	HI	<a href="#">H 916</a>	Appropriates funds to the department of health to fund the Hawaii rural health care provider loan repayment program.	Enacted
2016	NE	<a href="#">L 196</a>	Creates the Nebraska Rural Health Advisory Commission, establishes a student loan repayment program to provide financial incentives to medical, dental, master's level and doctorate-level mental health, and physician assistant students who agree to practice their profession in a designated health profession shortage areas.	Enacted

### State Rural Education Initiative Legislation

Year	State	Bill	Title/Summary	Status <sup>2</sup>
2019	MA	<a href="#">H 3756</a>	Increases student access to career technical education schools and programs which are aligned with regional labor market needs.	Pending
	SD	<a href="#">S 43</a>	Redirects funding to a collaborative program in rural veterinary medical education and to provide tax revenue for the support of veterinary students.	Enacted
	VA	<a href="#">H 2185</a>	Establishes the Virginia Rural Information Technology Apprenticeship Grant Fund and Program, to be administered by the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center, for the purpose of awarding grants to small, rural information technology businesses in certain localities in the Southwest and Southside regions of the state to establish apprenticeship programs for full time employees.	Enacted
2018	AL	<a href="#">SB 351</a>	Creates the Alabama Rural Hospital Resource Center, within the University of Alabama at Birmingham; creates a rural administrative residency program; establishes the areas in which the resource center may support participating rural hospitals.	Enacted
2016	PA	<a href="#">H 1606</a>	Promotes the establishment of a rural regional college in a multicounty rural area that is underserved by comprehensive community college education and work force development.	Enacted



## Conclusion

America's rural communities are challenged. Foremost among these challenges is the need for greater postsecondary education opportunities for rural citizens, leading to stronger economic and workforce development for their communities. Colleges and universities have the opportunity—and the mission—to partner with their state's rural communities to offer innovative, affordable and effective educational opportunities that meet state and community needs. Some state legislatures are playing a role by putting in place a variety of policies to expand both education and workforce opportunities in their rural communities.

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**NCSL Contact:**

**Bennett Boggs**

Education Program Principal

303-856-1516

[Ben.Boggs@ncsl.org](mailto:Ben.Boggs@ncsl.org)



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**William T. Pound, Executive Director**

7700 East First Place, Denver, Colorado 80230, 303-364-7700 | 444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 515, Washington, D.C. 20001, 202-624-5400

[www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)

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