

INSIGHTS
REPORT

The Road Ahead for Rural Colleges

How they are adapting to meet financial, cultural,
and geographic challenges

WITH
SUPPORT
FROM

Ascendium[®]

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION.



Ascendium Education Group is supporting this Chronicle of Higher Education Insights Report to shine a brighter light on rural colleges, their learners and the challenges they face, especially in these times of growing adversity brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

For too long, education philanthropy has overlooked post-high school learning in rural America. Good data and research on rural colleges and other postsecondary learning providers is hard to come by. At Ascendium, we're working to change that.

We refreshed our funding strategy in 2019 and made supporting rural postsecondary education and workforce training one of our four grantmaking focus areas. We want to better understand rural learners and postsecondary education providers through high-quality research. We want to build the capacity of providers to support learners through their entire experience, from enrollment to workforce entry. We want to catalyze investment in rural learners and providers through partnerships between institutions, systems and employers.

We're on a mission to strengthen rural postsecondary learning, no matter where it happens. Collaborating with other funders working in the space, we want to explore promising solutions, validate approaches and scale strategies to achieve systemwide impact.

Ascendium's mission becomes even more critical as COVID-19 reaches into rural communities already weathered by economic uncertainty and lacking robust health care resources.

Thank you for your interest in this Insights Report, "The Road Ahead for Rural Colleges." To learn more about Ascendium, please [subscribe to our monthly newsletter](#).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Kerwin". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Amy Kerwin

Vice President – Education Philanthropy
Ascendium Education Group



TABLE OF CONTENTS



WINONA STATE U.

Cover photo:
The campus green at
Winona State U., in
Minnesota

WINONA STATE U.

The Road Ahead for Rural Colleges

4 Introduction

5 Reaching New Students

10 Offering Academic Programs That Matter

15 Being a Good Neighbor

18 A Final Word

Contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

The Road Ahead for Rural Colleges was written by Danielle McLean and is underwritten by Ascendium Education Group. The Chronicle is fully responsible for the report's editorial content. ©2020 by The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc. All rights reserved. This material may not be reproduced without prior written permission of The Chronicle. For permission requests, contact us at copyright@chronicle.com.

INTRODUCTION

Leading rural colleges is no easy task. To be successful, academic leaders often must manage cash-strapped institutions in communities with dwindling and aging populations and economies in flux.

Many rural colleges are also located in regions with limited broadband access, where impoverished residents struggle to pay for health care and gas for long commutes. With the Covid-19 pandemic, rural colleges — like most of American higher education — find themselves having to adapt to an ever-changing digital world. As colleges reopened in the fall of 2020, it was unclear how the pandemic would affect long-term enrollment. Covid-19 has [upended enrollment goals](#) nationwide, and rural regions — despite having lower infection rates — are not insulated from the virus. If enrollments drop due to the pandemic, those losses could continue to be felt through the coming years as the country approaches the [looming enrollment cliff](#).

Rural-college leaders say they must be nimble, flexible, creative, and always ready to adapt. They must build relationships with business leaders and influential champions of their communities, and then sustain those relationships for decades to come.

Knowing their communities' needs helps leaders develop programs that train students for local jobs, allowing them to remain in the area. Those relationships can help colleges find new, unorthodox ways of generating revenue; remain vital to their regions; and make their communities appealing places in which to live.

The U.S. Department of Education

classifies 404 degree-granting, Title IV colleges as belonging to one of three rural categories. However, many other institutions have rural identities, even though they may be classified under the department's "town" categories, and are also included in this report. Many such colleges are located in or near a small town that is surrounded by sparsely populated areas, far from a major city.

Rural institutions are diverse, and include community colleges, branch campuses of public universities, religious and other private liberal-arts colleges, and tribally controlled colleges, among others. This report examines some of the strategies they are using to ensure a healthy future. It explores how they creatively recruit

new students, adapt academic programs to meet local needs, build strong community connections, and use their rural locations as a positive marketing tool.

"Part of our fiber and fabric," says Charlotte J. Warren, president of Lincoln Land Community College, in Illinois, "is being adaptable and flexible and being economic engines in our community."

42%

of freshmen at four-year colleges enrolled in an institution within 50 miles of their permanent homes in 2019

And

14%

lived within 10 miles

Source: "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019." Higher Education Research Institute, University of California at Los Angeles

Reaching New Students

Like many rural colleges, the University of Minnesota at Crookston has struggled in recent years to recruit students. The number of high-school graduates in the sparsely populated region is declining, and reaching them is a challenge.

University leaders know what they have to do to buck the trend, and they're working on it: They need to expand the pool of students from which they recruit. Historically, Crookston has not done much outreach to minority populations in the region. Nearly 90 percent of [Crookston's](#) nearly 8,000 residents are white, and the county — located in northwestern Minnesota, bordering North Dakota — is [demographically similar](#).

However, the region is home to both the Red Lake and White Earth Indian Nations, a community of Somalis who recently migrated, and a large Mexican American population that came to the area to work on its sugar-beet farms in the 1920s and '30s. About three years ago, university leaders decided to reach out and form partnerships with those communities, with the hope that they could create a new cohort of first-generation graduates likely

to live and work in the region long-term, says Mary Holz-Clause, the university's chancellor.

The university started advertising in Spanish and brought more-diverse students in the sixth through ninth grades onto campus for educational camps and events. It expanded a statewide University of Minnesota pathways program for Somali women and girls to its campus, and created a robotics program for underrepresented populations. In the fall of 2019, it held [a photo exhibit](#) on campus that showed the [history of sugar farmers](#) — connecting residents with their past.

“Underrepresented populations are growing, and they are critical to the vibrancy of this economy.”

It's too early to tell if the university's outreach efforts will work. “Underrepre-

sented populations are growing, and they are critical to the vibrancy of this economy here,” Holz-Clause says. “And it is job No. 1 that we succeed at that.”

However, university leaders have their work cut out for them

Gregory Diaz, a Crookston senior, transferred to the university in 2018 from Northland Community and Technical College, located about an hour north. Diaz, who is from the Dominican Republic, said Crookston was one of the few colleges that were willing to work with non-English-speaking students like himself, while allowing him to

play on its baseball team. While the university has been welcoming, Diaz, who is Black, says he has experienced racism from some members in the community while working at a local supermarket.

To make the campus more appealing to people of color, Diaz says, the campus needs to hire more diverse faculty members and staff, find ways to connect its students of color to the community, and do a better job recruiting students of color from the area’s local schools.

“We need to find ways to get more support from the community,” Diaz says. “Maybe more people will want to come here because they will see everyone that is here.”

Recruiting and enrolling students of all ages and races has become increasingly important for rural colleges as the nation’s demographics shift, and many of them are trying innovative ways to survive and stay relevant. Within the next five years, the total number of students entering college is expected to plummet more than [15 percent](#), and rural regions are expected to be hit harder than others. By 2034, older adults are expected to outnumber children for the first time in American history. Meanwhile, the white population is projected to shrink, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

To recruit more students from underrepresented communities, Houghton College, a Christian liberal-arts college in upstate New York, recently opened two extension sites over an hour away from its main campus in the hamlet of Houghton, N.Y. Over the past five years, the college, with just under 1,000 students, began offer-

How many rural colleges are there in the United States?

The nation’s rural institutions include, among others, community colleges, branch campuses of public universities, religious and other private liberal-arts colleges, and tribally controlled colleges.

The U.S. Department of Education classifies 404 degree-granting, Title IV colleges as belonging to one of three rural categories. The most remote category comprises 52 colleges located in census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an “urban cluster” (with 2,500 to 50,000 residents). However, many other colleges have rural identities, even though they may be formally classified under the Education Department’s “town” categories, and this report also includes them. Many such colleges are located in or near a small town that is surrounded by sparsely populated areas, far from a major city.

What about so-called education deserts — regions where there is no affordable college within a reasonable distance? With no broadly accepted definition, *The Chronicle* did its own analysis in 2018. It found that 11.2 million adults, or 3.5 percent of the adult population, lived in education deserts — defined as areas more than a 60-minute drive from a public college with an acceptance rate of at least 30 percent. Most education deserts were in Western states, and while most residents were white, Native Americans were far more likely than others to live in an education desert, the analysis found.



WINONA STATE U.

To help its Black students and faculty members avoid a lengthy drive to get a haircut, Winona State U., in southeastern Minnesota, arranged to have a barber who cuts Black hair visit the campus weekly. Pictured is Brison White, a student.

ing low-cost, two-year programs on the east and west sides of Buffalo — areas that are densely populated by refugees and African Americans, says Shirley A. Mullen, Houghton's president.

The effort has led to an increase in the number of non-white students, who made up 25 percent of total enrollment last year, up from 13 percent in academic year 2012-13, according to the college's statistics.

But for many colleges, the hard part isn't necessarily reaching out to underrepresented communities — it's ensuring that their campus is a welcoming place for underrepresented students and faculty members alike.

Winona State University's main campus in Minnesota lies near bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River valley. It's located two hours away from Minneapolis and an hour

away from Rochester, home to the highly regarded Mayo Clinic. The four-year public college's campus may be the most diverse place in the small city of Winona, but it has had trouble retaining faculty of color, says its president, Scott R. Olson.

Last year 11 percent of Winona State's instructional faculty identified as minority-group members, according to university data. For many Black, Latino/a, or Native American students and faculty members, that could mean having fewer people in the community with shared experiences to hang out with or date, says Olson.

University leaders are trying to break down that barrier. Over the past five years, the university appointed three African American administrators to its cabinet. Leaders are also focused on improving success rates of students of color, which in recent years has been higher than that of other institutions in the Minnesota state university system, according to Winona State data.

But sometimes small changes can have the largest impact: In 2019, Jonathan Locust Jr., the university's associate vice president for inclusion and diversity, noticed that Black students and faculty members had to drive an hour to find a barber shop that cut Black hair. So Winona State turned a men's locker room on campus into a small barbershop and hired a Black barber out of the Twin Cities to cut hair once a week, Olson says.

COAL MINERS AND COUNTRY SINGERS

Recruiting first-generation students is also challenging. To help boost its enrollment, Big Sandy Community and Technical College, a public two-year college in Prestonsburg, Ky. — located near the West Virginia border along the Route 23 Country Music Highway — has targeted [laid-off Eastern Kentucky coal miners](#). But Sherry Zylka, Big Sandy's president, says many former miners have moved away from the region to cities to find work and often feel that they don't belong in college. The key is getting them to campus and chatting with them about the college, she says.



JEFFERSON THACKER, BIG SANDY COMMUNITY & TECHNICAL COLLEGE

Bryce Dameron and Dylan Caudill are featured in a billboard campaign, organized by Big Sandy Community & Technical College, in Kentucky, designed to show people that education can lead to a better life. Both men completed electrical-technology programs offered by Big Sandy and were employed within weeks of finishing, the college says.

“Once we get them here, we can keep them,” she says, “but I think sometimes there’s that fear that they won’t fit into college, they won’t belong here.” Many are first-generation students.

Over the past two years, the college, which has four campuses throughout Eastern Kentucky, has held movie nights, set up recruitment tables at community events, conducted outreach efforts targeting high schoolers who may otherwise leave, and improved its social-media presence. It has put ads on billboards featuring students whose families have lived in the community for generations, and assisted students in need by handing out grocery-store gift cards.

Big Sandy, named for the sandbar-dotted tributary of the Ohio River that runs through the region, has also tapped into Eastern Kentucky’s rich history to recruit students. The region is home to country stars Chris Stapleton and Loretta Lynn and to the American folkloric Hatfield-McCoy

family feud. The college partnered with the city of Prestonsburg, holding concerts at a theater it co-owns, called the Mountain Arts Center, to develop local talent. The college is also in the process of launching an arts program that will teach singing, songwriting, music production, and talent development.

INTERNATIONAL DIVERSITY

Sometimes small colleges look outside their region, state, or even the country for new students. Huntington University, a Christian college in rural Indiana that enrolls about 1,400 students, has built two additional campuses over the past six years. One, in nearby Fort Wayne, Ind., offers an occupational-therapy program; the other, in Peoria, Ariz., offers a media-arts program and will soon begin a doctorate program in occupational therapy.

Despite its small size, Huntington wasn’t

struggling to enroll enough students, says Sherilyn R. Emberton, its president. But leaders weren't anticipating much growth, either. The Arizona campus, on the other hand, is located in a region that expects to see a growing demand for higher education, she says.

The new campuses have allowed students to take classes in different parts of the country, helped recruit faculty members with greater expertise, and provided students with more internship opportunities.

Since 2017, Greenville University, a Christian liberal-arts institution in Greenville, Ill., attempted to reverse a projected enrollment decline by actively recruiting international students. Greenville has recruited students through various international Christian, high-school, and higher-education networks, says Suzanne Davis, its president. Each year, the university enrolls about 100 students from Vietnam, China, and countries in

Central and South America.

A Free Methodist-affiliated college, Greenville prides itself on its diversity, with international students representing about 13 percent of its student body in academic year 2019-20. Before 2017, the university only enrolled about 20 international students each year, says Davis. She says international students are often attracted to Greenville because of its Christian focus and the opportunity to live and study in a small, picturesque American town that could be the subject of a Norman Rockwell painting.

International-travel restrictions during the pandemic, though, have created a "hostile" environment for recruitment and led to a 30-percent drop in international enrollment in the fall of 2020, says Davis. The college has responded by broadening its recruitment efforts to reach students from other nations.

Winona State U., in southeastern Minnesota, is located near bluffs overlooking the expansive Mississippi River valley. Its natural setting is a draw for students who enjoy hiking, rock climbing, and kayaking close to campus.



Offering Programs That Matter

Rural-college leaders must be ready to adapt their program offerings to meet the area's job market. Community colleges in particular play a central role in providing businesses and industries with skilled labor. "Community colleges are a catalyst of economic growth in their area," says Katya Nekrasova, senior manager of work-force grants and programs at the American Association of Community Colleges. "It is critical for them to make sure that the community has all the resources necessary for work-force development and economic development."

Louisiana State University at Eunice, a two-year public college, sees itself as a major player in the economic development of a region that has seen its once-robust [oil and gas sector](#) ravaged in recent years, says Nancee Sorenson, its chancellor. Univer-

"As one of the major providers of education and training, it is incumbent on us to meet the demands of the region. If we're not doing that, we're not doing our job in the community."

sity leaders plan to create more certificate programs and non-credit, work-force-train-

ing programs for careers in which there is a demand for skilled workers. For example, it plans to expand certificate programs for chemical technicians, as well as allied-health offerings in areas like medical billing, coding, and certified nursing assistance, Sorenson says.

“As one of the major providers of education and training, it is incumbent on us to meet the demands of the region,” she says. “If we’re not doing that, we’re not doing our job in the community.”

To do that job, colleges need strong communication and partnerships with key community partners to discuss work-force trends. Successful leaders work closely with local businesses, economic-development groups, and state governments, says Barbara K. Mistick, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

RURAL OUTREACH IN ILLINOIS

Lincoln Land Community College, which serves urban Springfield, Ill., and its massive surrounding rural region, draws students from 42 separate high schools. When deciding what programs or training to offer, the college relies on feedback from its outreach centers located throughout its coverage area and 18 separate advisory committees, says Charlotte J. Warren, Lincoln Land’s president.

The outreach centers are staffed by community members who work with local economic-development groups, high schools, and other partners that focus on work-force training in the county. Lincoln Land’s leaders also meet annually with the advisory groups — composed of leaders from business sectors like information technology, nursing, and automotive repair — to discuss how the college can help provide training.

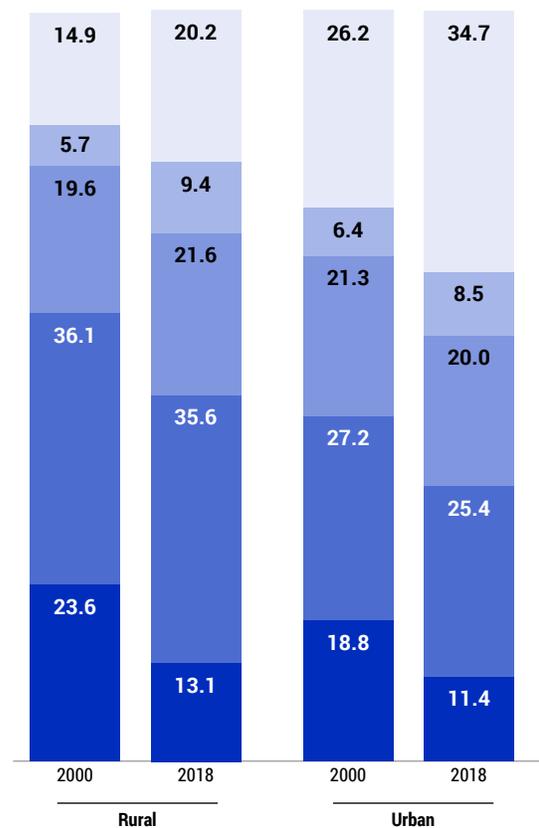
Good communication isn’t enough, though. Colleges need to be able to analyze sophisticated data that combines information on local industries, needed skills, educational requirements for available jobs, and population trends, says Naicu’s Mistick.

College leaders need to be creative when

making programming changes, says Philip C. Rogers, senior vice president at the American Council on Education. He cautions that institutions that are struggling financially must make sure any changes are consistent with their core missions and values — even during the pandemic. College leaders must

Educational Attainment in Rural vs. Urban Areas, 2000 and 2018

- Bachelor’s degree or higher
- Associate degree
- Some college, no degree
- High-school diploma or equivalent
- Less than high-school diploma or equivalent



Note: Educational attainment for adults 25 and older. Urban and rural status is determined by Office of Management and Budget’s 2015 metropolitan area definitions.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, bureau of the Census, Census 2000 and 2018 American Community Survey

develop a strong strategic-planning process and educate their campuses about their missions, their vulnerabilities, and their role in the community, says Mildred García, president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

“Institutions need to do some real soul searching about what makes them unique,” she says.

Leaders at Houghton College in upstate N.Y., for instance, are promoting academic programs centered around the college’s rural landscape, says Mullen, its president. The ecologically diverse region includes [large forests](#) and nearby [Letchworth State Park](#), known as the “Grand Canyon of the East” because of its waterfalls and tall cliffs that tower above the Genesee River. Given its vast natural habitat, the college is adding more offerings on environmental sustainability to its existing biology program and giving students the chance to conduct research on local plant life and animals. Houghton is also promoting its equestrian program nationally and abroad. The program prepares students looking to enter the horseback-riding business or to become horse trainers.

REACHING STUDENTS THROUGH VIRTUAL REALITY

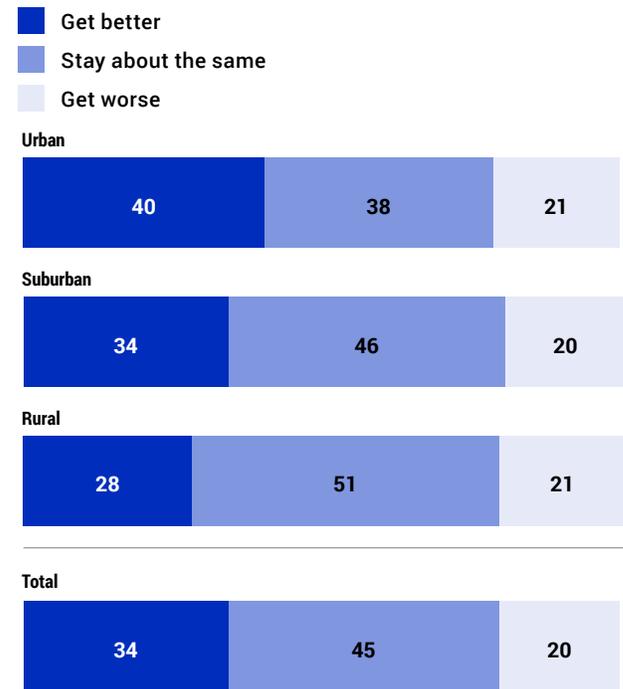
As rural colleges grapple with larger issues surrounding broadband access and the long distances between students’ homes, campuses, and jobs, college leaders must think creatively when building programs to meet work-force needs. One in four rural residents said high-speed internet access was a major problem in their area, according to a 2018 Pew Research Center survey.

Wallace State Community College serves an area between Huntsville and Birmingham, Ala., where medical care and job opportunities can be hours away and internet access is limited. So the college decided to embrace new technologies, including virtual-reality classrooms, to broaden its academic offerings.

About five years ago, students enrolled in Wallace State health programs began using

Rural Residents are More Pessimistic About the Future of Jobs

Numbers show the percentage of respondents who said that, 10 years from now, they expected job availability in their communities to get better, stay the same, or get worse.



Note: Respondents who didn’t answer are not shown.

Source: “What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban, and Rural Communities.” Pew Research Center survey, 2018

a [simulation center](#) that allows them to run real-time scenarios on mannequins under the oversight of doctors and nurses. About two years before that, after receiving a tax grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, the college developed virtual-reality simulations that allowed students in applied-science programs like diesel technology, nursing, and physical-therapy to run real-life scenarios through the lens of 3-D glasses. Students could inspect bone structures and the heart in 3-D, practice transferring patients from a stretcher to a bed, and inspect and repair diesel trucks, says Vicki Hawsey Karolewics, Wallace State’s president.

The college has partnered with a truck-manufacturing company, Truckworx Kenworth, among others companies, to pro-

vide students with technical experience and apprenticeships. The goal is not to replace hands-on experience but to shorten the amount of time that students need to commute long distances to receive that training.

STRATEGIC PROGRAM CUTS

At times rural colleges, like others, must cut certain programs so they can invest in others. That could mean cutting faculty jobs, which, at a small college, can have a major impact on faculty relations. Securing faculty “buy-in” in such cases is essential, says Greg Christy, president of Northwestern College, a Christian liberal-arts college in Orange City, Iowa.

When Northwestern’s leaders decided to replace low-performing programs with new programs for physician assistants and in business and accounting, they determined which positions should be cut through a nearly two-year process that involved faculty and staff members. In May 2018, the president formed a five-member faculty group to conduct a complete review of Northwestern’s academic programs, using third-party enrollment and financial data. The panel used certain criteria to categorize programs: Some, for example, were described as “flourishing and needs more resources,” while weaker programs were targeted to receive less support or to be eliminated.

The report was shared with the faculty, and each academic department had the opportunity to respond. Academic deans and other administrative staff then decided what positions should be eliminated, Christy says. Northwestern eventually eliminated 11 full-time positions, including five involving retirements, in low-performing programs that included philosophy, history, music, writing, and literature.

While some faculty members were upset that fewer students pursued humanities majors “for the simple love of the discipline,” they trusted the process since it was driven by data, rooted in the college’s strategic plan, and led by their own peers, says Tamara Fynaardt, vice president for enrollment and marketing at Northwestern.

The liberal arts, she adds, are still part of the college’s core curriculum.

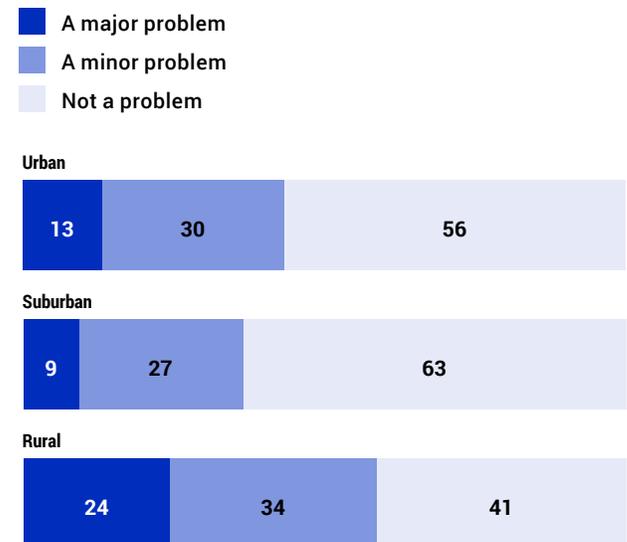
A TRIBAL COLLEGE INNOVATES

The pandemic has forced some rural colleges, including the tribally controlled Blackfeet Community College, in Montana, to think creatively about ways to boost falling enrollment. The college, on the Blackfeet Nation reservation, is sandwiched between plains and Glacier National Park near the Canadian border.

Heading into the fall 2020 semester, leaders were initially concerned that enrollment, already well below a previous peak of 500, would drop even further. Using federal emergency-relief funding from the Cares Act, the college purchased laptop computers and helped students pay for Wi-Fi as almost all classes went online. College leaders also forgave student-loan debts of former students who were unable to finish their degrees, giving them the financial

One-Fourth of Rural Residents Say High-speed Internet Access is a Major Problem

Numbers show the percentage of respondents rating high-speed internet access in their communities



Note: Respondents who didn’t answer are not shown.

Source: “What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban, and Rural Communities.” Pew Research Center survey, 2018



TREVOR SPOTTED EAGLE

Students from Blackfeet Community College, a tribal college in Montana, take part in a traditional stick-game competition, which involves songs and the act of guessing which game piece the other team is hiding.

leeway to return. Karla Bird, Blackfeet's president, says the move will ultimately pay off as more students re-enroll. Almost 400 pre-registered for the fall-2020 semester.

With the additional revenue, leaders are thinking of new ways to attract students, such as accelerated winter courses and bachelor's-degree programs in nursing, education, and other fields in which the associate-degree job market has been saturated. The pandemic "has opened a lot of opportunities and a lot of doors that I think we've never really been forced to explore before," says Bird.

The debt forgiveness allowed Nina Rock, a 37-year-old living on the reservation, to return to college so she could earn a degree and eventually land an electrical-engineering job. She first enrolled at Blackfeet in 2004 but had to put her education on hold after struggling to balance classes and child care. Rock has since raised three children

and held mostly minimum-wage jobs before returning to the college in 2019. She had to interrupt her studies again due to family is-

“Institutions need to do some real soul searching about what makes them unique.”

sues, but returned when she learned the college was offering debt forgiveness. “I need that education to get those better-paying jobs and get those things that me and my kids need,” she says. “I want to finish college and show that it doesn't matter how old you get, you can obtain your college education. It's possible.”

Being a Good Neighbor

The success of colleges in rural areas is critical. Without them, communities can become [education deserts](#), potentially preventing residents from starting new businesses and reactivating local economies if manufacturing companies or other employers leave town, says Naicu's Mistick.

Such a community could find itself with a shortage of teachers or medical professionals, and even struggle to participate in American democracy, she adds.

But there are many creative ways in which colleges can help make their rural communities more desirable places to live. Berry College, in Mount Berry, Ga., has been using part of its 27,000-acre campus — which it says is the world's largest contiguous campus — to help build major attractions and provide services in its community. Through a public-private partnership, the private liberal-arts college donated 35 acres of land to the nearby city of Rome, Ga., so it could build a 63-court tennis center. Since it opened in 2016, the center has held large amateur tournaments that have brought thousands of people to the city each year.

Next door to the tennis center, Berry is in

the process of developing an 80-room hotel that will carry the brand [Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott](#). The college will own the hotel and manage it in partnership with Hotel Equities of Atlanta.

Berry is now in the process of opening a \$130-million retirement community on more than 50 acres of its land. It has partnered with a nonprofit group that will own and operate the community. A number of students already work there.

These projects give people a reason to visit and possibly relocate to the area, says Stephen R. Briggs, Berry's president. They generate revenue for the city, county, and the college; allow more people to appreciate the region's natural beauty; and provide students with meaningful job opportunities.

"One of the questions we look at is: How do we take the best part of our overall assets and use it in a way to best serve the overall mission of the university and provide the income stream as well?" says Briggs. "The health of our community, the health of Georgia is good for the long-term health of the college."

Such investments can help colleges turn their rural location into an advantage, says Mistick, Naicu's president. But a college

doesn't need to build a multimillion-dollar hotel or tennis center to help energize its local economy.

NATURAL BEAUTY SELLS

Outdoor recreation — including boating, fishing, and hiking — is a major industry throughout the Appalachian region of western North Carolina and a vital part of its economy. In October 2018, Western Carolina University organized and hosted an outdoor-recreation conference. The idea was to bring leaders from all aspects of the industry into the same room so they could collectively determine how to grow the sector and how the university could help, says Kelli R. Brown, Western Carolina's chancellor.

The first year, the conference attracted 250 people representing outdoor-recreation companies, attractions, product manufacturers, chamber of commerce officials, local parks and recreation departments, and other work-force-development groups. By the second year, the conference drew 500 participants, prompting the university to move it to a hotel an hour away in Asheville, N.C.

The feedback from that conference convinced leaders to start a master's program in outdoor recreation, which attracted 21 students in its first year, says Brown. It has also helped promote small businesses and improved the region's reputation nationally as an outdoor-recreation hub.

Elsewhere, colleges and community leaders have worked together to expand access to high-speed internet in their region and to purchase new laptops, iPads, and hot spots for students, says ACE's Rogers. They have also jointly developed policing partnerships and provided entertainment through arts and athletics, he says.

When small colleges invest in their communities, the changes can be drastic. Mount Vernon Nazarene University, a Christian liberal-arts institution in

central Ohio, has played a major role in reinvigorating the once-vacant downtown of its community. It did so with funding support from a local manufacturing company, Ariel Corporation, says Henry W. Spaulding, Mount Vernon's president.

In 2011, the university moved its nursing program to downtown Mount Vernon. The year before, it had purchased and renovated a building next door where its art and graphic-design program relocated, complete with a popular art gallery open to the public.

The university also purchased and rejuvenated a deteriorating Victorian building and turned it into a four-story

“How do we take the best part of our overall assets and use it in a way to best serve the overall mission of the university and provide the income stream as well? The health of our community, the health of Georgia is good for the long-term health of the college.”

hotel. While it looks and feels like a normal hotel, the university's logo appears on the hotel website and on brochures in the lobby. Recently, Happy Bean, a local coffee shop managed and staffed by alumni and students, opened in one



BEN HAWS, MVNU MARKETING

Mount Vernon Nazarene U., in Ohio, has invested in its community through building projects. It converted an old building downtown into the Mount Vernon Grand Hotel, which offers visiting alumni and parents a place to stay.

of the university's downtown buildings. Other university projects include a new fountain located downtown and a planned condo redevelopment.

The hotel, operated by a management company, generates revenue for the university and provides alumni and parents with a place to stay when they come to town, says Spaulding. The university runs shuttle buses downtown so students can shop and eat there. Kenyon College and Central Ohio Technical College, neighboring institutions, have also purchased

and renovated buildings in downtown Mount Vernon. The downtown efforts have helped make the community a more attractive place to live, boosted the local economy by bringing more foot traffic to businesses, and attracted new students, Spaulding says.

"It gives our students an opportunity to get off the main campus and be downtown in these reinvigorated buildings and get food, and that helps as well," he says. "The other option would be to have a deteriorating downtown."

The road ahead can seem daunting for rural colleges. But they can overcome many of the challenges they face — whether related to enrollment, government funding, economic stagnation, or other issues — if they are willing to evolve and adapt.

Many of them are trying: They're recruiting students their colleges historically have failed to reach, including immigrants, minority groups, and those whose families never went to college. They're building partnerships with local high schools, advertising in Spanish, recruiting workers who were laid off when industries closed, and generally trying to make their campuses more welcoming places.

Sometimes a college finds a new cohort of students by opening a new campus that fulfills local needs. It might be an hour down the road, or, in Huntington University's case, several states away.

Rural colleges help meet the work-force demands of their region in creative ways. That might mean providing training and certificates for medical or accounting jobs if the region has a demand for qualified workers in those fields. Or creating or advertising programs that give the campus a strong identity — perhaps emphasizing its regional ecology. Or attracting students nationally with unique programs in equestrian management or outdoor recreation.

However, a college's core identity and values must be the catalyst for such changes. Strong strategic planning and sophisticated data that include the region's demographics

and work-force demands are also essential.

College leaders can't work in isolation when repositioning their institutions for the future. They need to form and maintain strong partnerships with a variety of stakeholders in their region, including business leaders, development authorities, schools, and state and local governments, among others. And it's critical that they break down barriers that prevent many students from succeeding. That could mean forgiving student-loan debt for those who left before earning a degree, or providing students with Wi-Fi hot spots, grocery-store gift cards, or hands-on experience through virtual reality.

“I want to finish college and show that it doesn't matter how old you get, you can obtain your college education. It's possible.”

Finally, by investing in their communities as well as their students, rural colleges can make their surroundings more appealing places in which to live — and position themselves for future success.

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

1255 Twenty-Third Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037
(202) 466-1000 | [Chronicle.com](https://www.chronicle.com)