

COVID-19 and Rural Higher Education

Rapid Innovation and Ideas for the Future

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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.