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A National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda

National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda Working Group

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A National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda: Reflections from the Working Group

Though national postsecondary education and workforce training outcomes have drawn growing attention in recent decades, very little research has centered rural learners and rural postsecondary education. The data that exist related to rural postsecondary education attainment are extremely limited. Increasingly, practitioners, researchers and philanthropic organizations in the rural postsecondary education and workforce training space have called for the advancement of a national rural postsecondary research agenda to fill this critical gap and unlock insights into the promising practices that can help support rural learners in earning degrees or credentials that lead to meaningful careers.

Developed with support from Ascendium Education Group (Ascendium), the research agenda was developed by an advisory group of researchers and practitioners and explores four critical areas to help build understanding of the many factors influencing rural learner success, including:

- The rural institution as a catalyst for mobility and economic growth
- Capacities for effective service and innovation at rural institutions
- The rural student learning journey
- The value of postsecondary education for rural learners

There are many important topics and questions to explore in the realm of rural postsecondary education and learner experiences, and this research agenda does not attempt to cover them all. Instead, it aims to complement ongoing research in the K-12 and postsecondary education spaces, including the *National Rural Education Association Research Agenda*, and to point researchers to those areas of rural postsecondary practice and leadership where the most pressing opportunities exist for new research. To learn more about the agenda and Ascendium's interest in supporting rural education and workforce training, visit ascendiumphilanthropy.org.

Comments from the Working Group

The research agenda was developed by an advisory group of researchers and practitioners with deep expertise in rural postsecondary education.

Building on existing research, lived experiences and grounded perspectives of those working and living in rural geographies, this group collaboratively identified themes and questions. Members of the team have shared their reflections on the agenda, the process for developing it and the importance of these questions for future efforts.

Devon Brenner

The Rural Educator has been published for most of the last century, and over those decades the vast majority of the articles published in the journal focus on K-12 education contexts and practices. As editors, we recognize the importance of post-secondary education for rural students and communities and the need for scholarship to inform policy and practice. Rurally-located institutions play an important role in the economic and cultural well-being of their communities, and there is a need for research that examines and advances that role. There is also a need for research that examines the experiences of rural students who may be attending non-rurally-located post-secondary institutions and the practices that support their success. We hope that the research agenda will bring new voices and perspectives to the rural education research community and that the journal will serve as a venue for sharing that work.

Tyler Hallmark

While past research agendas may have dedicated a specific focus area to addressing diversity within the given population, our working group was intentional on *not* setting diversity amongst rural students and communities apart from other foci. Instead, we recognized the importance of embedding the importance of diverse rural populations across *each* of the four focus areas that we identified. It is vital that those reading and building off of this agenda take that lesson to heart, asking themselves to consider the various identities that may intersect in any research question they seek to address.

Perhaps those research questions which most urgently need addressing — and those top of mind given the current climate in the U.S. — are questions as they pertain to race and ethnicity. For too long,

communities of color have been overlooked in rural research (Sowl & Crane, 2021), despite the growing racial diversity in rural areas — with nine out of 10 rural places experiencing increases in diversity from 1990 to 2010 (Sharp & Lee, 2016). Moving forward, it is essential that researchers critically think about how systemic racism perpetuates educational disparities in rural areas — interrogating how both race *and* rurality shape students' college-going experiences, how race *and* rurality shape learners' skill and network development in college and how the types of institutions serving rural communities (i.e., Historically Black Colleges and Universities as compared to Predominantly White Institutions) may differentially impact students' journeys.

Similarly, racial research has historically neglected rural subgroups, despite the distinct disparities for rural people of color as compared to their urban counterparts. For instance, in 2015, just 14% of Black adults from urban areas had less than a high school degree or equivalent, compared to 24% of Black adults from rural areas (USDA, 2017). In turn, this agenda may be useful in guiding even non-rural scholars in broadening their research agendas to encompass rural subgroups.

Andrew Koricich

The establishment of a rural postsecondary research agenda is a critically important advancement in our ability to better understand postsecondary educational pathways, opportunities, successes and outcomes for students from rural communities. A key feature of this agenda is accounting for student, institutional and community contexts as interconnected layers where research can be done to improve this understanding. Additionally, the framing of the agenda accounts for intersectionality of the rural identity with other traditionally marginalized or excluded populations to underscore the rich diversity of these places and students.

The process to establish this research agenda was robust and collaborative, with voices representing a range of experiences and research interests. Taken in total, this research agenda provides a useful roadmap for scholars seeking to expand our knowledge of rural postsecondary issues, as well as for foundations and policymakers who are seeking to better target resources to effectively serve this population. As someone who researches rural-serving institutions, in particular, I am heartened to see this agenda include an institutional lens, as it is difficult to adequately

understand the experiences and needs of rural students without understanding the postsecondary institutions that serve them and their communities. Historically, rural postsecondary research has focused on the student experience, and I am hopeful that this research agenda will inspire others to consider institutional factors and issues to better guide how colleges and universities can promote greater opportunity and success for rural students.

Gerri Maxwell

Once of the most beneficial experiences of serving on the National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda working group was the opportunity to learn from the others in the group. I feel far less in touch now in my quasi-admin role, and it was completely my honor to interact with the brightest and best young scholars in rural education. One of my most recent research projects on a high-profile Texas rural school triad/partnership, of which one aspect includes workforce certifications for students, strongly supports the importance of these postsecondary institutions, their presence and the potential impact on rural communities.

Darris Means

When I first became engaged in rural education research and scholarship, I quickly learned there was not much representation of rural education scholarship across higher education conferences, higher education journals and in funding priorities for philanthropic organizations. While there has been an increase in rural postsecondary education scholarship in recent years (e.g., Ardoin, 2018; Chambers & Crumb, 2021; Crain & Newlin, 2021; Koricich et al., 2018), there remained a need for philanthropic organizations to play a role in supporting rural education scholarship in their own priorities.

Without resources, rural education researchers may find it difficult to lead research studies that can amplify the critical assets of rural college students and rural postsecondary education institutions while aiming to reduce spatial inequities. Thus, I was thrilled to receive an invitation from Ascendium to serve as a member of their working group to support the development and launch of the National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda, working alongside colleagues who are also committed to rural education. While all four focus areas of the agenda are critical to rural student success, I am excited about the possibilities of The Rural Student Learning

Journey focus area. This focus area invites researchers, university leaders, policymakers and other key stakeholders to consider how to improve postsecondary education pathways for rural learners, recognizing the diversity of contexts and institutions in which students learn and the diversity of educational experiences that are shaped by students' social identities and by interlocking forms of oppression, such as classism, racism and sexism. The research agenda provides a critical framework for building upon the assets of rural students and rural postsecondary education institutions to elevate rural student success.

Leslie Neal

As a department chair of a rural community college, The Value of Postsecondary Education for Rural Learners is a focus area that holds particular significance for me. Postsecondary institutions often strive for the student experience to include growth upon completion, but do students value education

with the same definition of the term “value” as their institution?

As scholars approach the agenda, their research outcomes will advance the ways rurality is discussed in academia and tangibly impact some of the barriers that effect rural institutions and their stakeholders. Often, rural identity does not include higher education as one of its defining characteristics and this often results in less rural students seeking higher education or less support from their community when seeking higher educational opportunities (Agger et al., 2018). Academics such as Ashley Stone (2017) suggest that rural students can and will succeed in the realm of higher education if there is a support system in place to provide them opportunities of growth and feelings of belonging.

The findings that emerge from the forthcoming research will not only enlighten institutions of the characteristics of students' intrinsic motivations but could also point to specific ways the institution can act as an extrinsic motivator for its students.

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National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda

To learn more about how the research agenda was developed and read the full research agenda, visit <https://ascendiumphilanthropy.org/>

Though national postsecondary education and workforce training outcomes have drawn growing attention in recent decades, very little of that attention has gone toward rural postsecondary education and learners. The data that exist related to rural postsecondary education attainment are also extremely limited, and the experiences of learners from rural communities receive scant attention. Increasingly, practitioners, researchers and philanthropic organizations in the rural postsecondary education and workforce training space have called for the advancement of a national rural postsecondary research agenda to fill this critical gap.

This research agenda, produced through the collaborative effort of a diverse group of researchers and organizations, and with support from **Ascendium Education Group**, focuses on generating knowledge that can help practitioners and policymakers remove systemic barriers to improved and more equitable outcomes for rural learners at two- and four-year institutions.

The research agenda explores four critical focus areas to help build field understanding of the many factors influencing rural learner success — especially learners from low-income backgrounds — in postsecondary education and entry to the workforce.



The Rural Institution as a Catalyst for Mobility and Economic Growth



Capacities for Effective Service and Innovation at Rural Institutions



The Rural Student Learning Journey



The Value of Postsecondary Education for Rural Learners

National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda

GUIDING QUESTIONS BY RESEARCH FOCUS AREA



The Rural Institution as a Catalyst for Mobility and Economic Growth

1. What are the various roles that rural postsecondary institutions play in their communities or regions? What relationship does the role rural postsecondary institutions play have with rural learner success as measured by persistence, completion and job placement?
2. In what ways do rural postsecondary institutions build social and cultural capital in their local area? How do rural postsecondary institutions' social and cultural capital in their communities or regions affect rural learner persistence, completion and job placement?
3. How do employers perceive the value of credentials or certificates from rural postsecondary institutions? What is the association, if any, between employers' perceptions and rates of rural postsecondary institution attendance and rural learner persistence, completion and job placement?
4. How do rural postsecondary institutions work with local partners to provide opportunities that contribute to learner persistence, completion and job placement? What are the key benefits of these partnerships to rural postsecondary institutions, partner organizations and learners?



Capacities for Effective Service and Innovation at Rural Institutions

1. How do rural postsecondary institutions develop, recruit and retain the talent and expertise required to effectively respond to changing program and learner needs?
2. How do rural postsecondary institutions build their capacity for collecting and using data? What is the association between data capacity at rural postsecondary institutions and learner persistence, completion and job placement?
3. How do capacities in areas like institutional research, academic research and grant writing affect rural postsecondary institutions' ability to implement changes to improve rural learner persistence, completion and job placement?
4. How do rural institutions create the conditions to engage in long-term strategic and financial planning in support of their student success priorities?



The Rural Student Learning Journey

1. What types of first-year experiences, programs and supports (e.g., tailored orientations, student success courses, corequisite remediation) have the greatest impacts on rural learner persistence?
2. What are the effects of a large-scale redesign of the learner experience (e.g., implementation of math pathways or integrated advising) on rural learner persistence, completion and job placement?
3. Are early momentum metrics effective indicators of student success for rural learners? What other early indicators predict rural learners' postsecondary progress and completion, as well as labor market success?
4. How do rural postsecondary institutions modify high-impact practices in teaching and learning, and integrated student supports to fit local contexts and institutional resources?



The Value of Postsecondary Education for Rural Learners

1. How do rural learners think about and define the value of their postsecondary education, and how does that change over time and after completion of their credential?
2. How does rural learner perception of the value of postsecondary education relate to learner persistence, completion and job placement?
3. Does postsecondary education position rural learners to pursue the professional, personal and civic opportunities they value? What skills, knowledge, networks and relationships — gained during college — do recent graduates identify as important to their current work, lives and communities?
4. What is the value of rural postsecondary credentials to rural learners in terms of broadened economic or job opportunities?