Gaining by Degree: Increasing Rural Education, Career and Community Success
America’s Rural Opportunity

Janet Topolsky
Executive Director, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group
America’s Rural Opportunity

Noa Meyer
Partner & Head of Philanthropy and Social Impact, BDT & Company
President, rootEd Alliance
Gaining by Degrees: Increasing Rural Education, Career and Community Success

Robert Templin

*Senior Fellow, The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program*
Educational Attainment in Rural Communities

Educational Attainment in Rural Communities

- Among the bottom 10% of counties in the U.S. in terms of postsecondary educational attainment, 84% are rural
- There are 21 million adults without a college degree in rural America
An opportunity gap, not an ability gap

- Rural students outperform urban peers in national standardized measures of math & English (NAEP)

- 23% of rural students earn dual enrollment credits in high school compared to 16% nationwide
Fewer young people from rural areas are enrolled in college.

National Center for Educational Statistics, Rural Education in America
Why?

- Rural household income tends to be 20-25% less than in urban areas, making college less affordable for those in rural areas.
- Geographic distance adds both additional costs and a psychological barrier for young people growing up in rural areas.
- 41 million Americans - 82% of them rural - live in “higher education deserts” at least a thirty-minute drive from the nearest college or university.
Students from low-income rural schools are least likely to go to college directly after high school.

---

**Rates of College Enrollment in the First Fall after High School Graduation**

- Low-Income Rural Schools: 50%
- Higher Income Rural Schools: 65%
- Low-Income Urban Schools: 53%
- Higher Income Urban Schools: 68%
Students from low-income rural schools who do enroll in college are less likely to persist.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low-Income Rural Schools</th>
<th>Higher Income Rural Schools</th>
<th>Low-Income Urban Schools</th>
<th>Higher Income Urban Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persistence Rate</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, High School Benchmarks Report, 2013
Many enroll in community colleges.

College Completion Rates Six Years after High School Graduation, Class of 2012, Public Non-Charter Schools

- Community Colleges: 41%
- Public 4-Year: 60%
- Private Non-Profit 4-Year: 77%
Rural students who persist experience higher college completion rates than urban students.

College Completion Rates Six Years after High School Graduation, Class of 2012, Public Non-Charter Schools

- Rural: 41%
- Suburban: 47%
- Urban: 36%
Those who do earn bachelor’s degrees often move to find work in metropolitan areas that offer more job opportunities and higher wages.
Most rural economies have not recovered from the Great Recession
Yet there is a “skills gap” in rural America

- Growth of low-wage service jobs
- Unfilled jobs in rural communities that provide a living wage requiring postsecondary credentials
- Misalignment of training programs with the needs of rural communities
Vacant jobs in rural communities that pay a living wage

- Teachers
- Registered Nurses
- Accountants
- Paralegals
- Manufacturing production workers
- Truck drivers
- Healthcare professionals
- Healthcare technicians
- Retail sales managers
- Welders
- Automotive mechanics
- Food service managers
- HVAC & Refrigeration Mechanics & Installers
- Public safety officers and EMT’s
The paradox of college attainment in rural areas

- Improving rural economies increasingly depends upon residents with post-secondary credentials
- Improving college access for rural students often means students leaving to attend college
- College completion often accelerates rural out-migration of young adults
Rural community colleges are the linchpin

- 428 rural community colleges across 43 states
- 1.2 million students enrolled in rural colleges
- Evidence from the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence has shown that rural colleges have demonstrated remarkable success in areas such as equity outcomes and degree completion
- Excellent rural community colleges serve special purposes in addition to postsecondary education as key employers, regional conveners, data analysts, and catalysts of economic development

Lake Area Technical Institute has a partnership with Caterpillar called ThinkBIG, preparing students for high-skilled jobs in South Dakota.