



COLLEGE AND CAREER POSSIBILITIES ROOTED IN PLACE

How Rural Community College and
Industry Partnerships Help People,
Communities, and Businesses Thrive



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was written by Kate Kinder and Lindsey Reichlin Cruse of National Skills Coalition (NSC), and Marc Goldberg of Skills Strategy Consulting. The authors are grateful for the contribution of their NSC colleagues, including Jeannine LaPrad, Kate Michaels, Amanda Bergson-Shilcock, Melissa Johnson, and Nicky Lauricella Coolberth. NSC would like to recognize the Ascendium Education Group for its generous support of this research and report. The authors are grateful to the national partners, issue-area experts, and rural community college leaders and staff who spoke to the authors for their research and were integral to informing the development of this report, including reviewing selected content and providing feedback.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	2
I. Introduction	5
II. Understanding the Context for Rural Industry Partnerships	6
Increasing Diversity of Rural Communities and Workers	6
Diverse Rural Economies.....	6
Disparities Experienced by Rural Communities	6
III. Rural Community Colleges as Engines of Economic Opportunity and Equity	8
IV. Rural Community College and Industry Partnerships: Creating Place-Based Pathways and Opportunity	8
Strong Relationships and Leadership Buy-In.....	9
Multifaceted, Comprehensive, and Collaborative Partnership Strategies	10
Resource Maximization across Partners to Benefit Learners, Employers, and Rural Communities	12
Responsive to the Local Labor Market.....	13
Inclusive and Place-Based College and Career Pathways	14
Paid Work-Based Learning, Dual Credit, and Other Skills-Focused Educational Opportunities.....	15
Braided Funding to Support Rural Community College-Industry Partnerships.....	16
V. Key Success Factors for Strong Rural Partnerships	20
Listening to Rural Communities and Addressing the Past to Build Trust	20
Bridging Siloes across Industries and Systems to Center Students and Adapt to Employer Needs.....	21
Fulfilling the Promise of Industry Partnerships by Supporting Students Holistically.....	22
Using Data to Inform Decisions and Boost the Impact of Industry Partnerships	23
VI. Policy, Funding, and Systems Implications: Supporting and Scaling What Works	24
Modernize Investments.....	25
Center Rural Students.....	25
Expand Capacity	25
Engage and Listen to Rural Voices	26
Appendix	27
Endnotes	28



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rural America is complex and varied in its geographies, economies, cultures, and communities, as well as in its strengths, challenges, and needs. Deeply rooted in their communities, rural community colleges serve as engines of economic opportunity and equity, offering students place-based programs and pathways that lead to good jobs. They also develop dynamic and responsive industry partnerships, to ensure their workforce education and training curriculum, programs, and transfer pathways meet the needs of local employers and their rural communities. The shared commitment among colleges, employers, and community members to creating place-based opportunities to thrive is an important lever for building on rural assets and strengths and countering the challenges that face rural America, which limit residents' access to educational and economic opportunities.

High-quality postsecondary training and education pathways are more crucial than ever to ensure equitable access to quality jobs. Providing all people and communities with the necessary resources and access to postsecondary pathways that lead to careers is essential for improving collective wellbeing and building an inclusive economy—one where workers, businesses, and regions most impacted by economic shifts and structural barriers to opportunity are empowered to equitably participate and benefit.

This report highlights how rural community college and industry partnerships benefit rural learners and employers alike and improve the overall economic prosperity of rural communities. It also seeks to expand awareness of the variety of rural contexts, and the state systems, investments, and policies, that can help drive and sustain effective rural community college and industry partnerships.

Creating Place-Based Pathways and Opportunity

NSC's research revealed that rural college-industry partnerships are characterized by:

- **Strong Relationships and Leadership Buy-in.** Building and maintaining strong relationships and buy-in among rural community college leaders and staff/faculty, industry partners, and other economic development and workforce stakeholders is foundational. It also contributes to the sustainability and durability of partnerships.
- **Multifaceted, Comprehensive, and Collaborative Partnership Strategies.** Rural industry partnerships take many forms. Rural colleges convene industry and other key stakeholders to set the table for partnership, as well as participate in sector partnerships convened by other entities. They also form individual relationships with employers to inform program and curriculum design and increase work-based learning and job placement opportunities for students.
- **Resource Maximization across Partners to Benefit Learners, Employers, and Rural Communities.** Since rural communities may have limited resources, partnerships with employers can enable both to maximize resources and leverage strengths. For example, some businesses provide tools for students, equipment for programs, and financial support through scholarships to address the financial constraints that students face.
- **Responsive to the Local Labor Market.** Colleges consistently look to industry partners to validate labor market data, inform curriculum and competency development, identify or verify credentials of value, and clarify pathways for career advancement. Regional labor market information analysis and trend data are also essential to inform colleges' program design and evaluation processes, as well as their industry partnerships.
- **Inclusive and Place-Based College and Career Pathways.** Rural community colleges are especially attuned to offering programs that build the skills and competencies required for good jobs in their local community. To make this a reality, they rely on effective industry partnerships that shape and support an innovative array of services, programs, and instructional modalities. Rural colleges often design their services and pathways for learners who have been historically excluded from college programs and good jobs—including adult learners, students of color, immigrants and English Language Learners, and women pursuing careers in male-dominated fields.

- **Paid Work-Based Learning, Dual Credit, and Other Skills-Focused Educational Opportunities.** Effective industry partnerships lead to work-based learning, dual credit programs, apprenticeships, and other skills-based education opportunities that can boost equitable student success and expand career pathways. Implementing these approaches also benefits rural employers, by creating an expanded pool of local candidates who have experience in their industry, as well as providing businesses with the chance to train, mentor, and develop future employees.
- **Braided Funding to Support Rural Community College-Industry Partnerships.** Rural community colleges rely on a constellation of policies, funding, public-private partnerships, and systems to support their industry partnerships and the resultant programs and services. Community colleges braid together a mix of federal, state, and local funding, in addition to raising donations and seeking grants to supplement where public investments fall short.

Key Success Factors for Strong Rural Partnerships

NSC's research finds that effective rural community college and industry partnerships feature, prioritize, and result in:

- **Listening to Rural Communities and Addressing the Past to Build Trust.** The long history of harm to rural workers and communities of color can jeopardize even the best-intentioned efforts to form partnerships today. It is essential to understand rural communities' past experiences and concerns if present-day partnerships efforts are to succeed.
- **Bridging Siloes Across Industries and Systems to Center Students and Adapt to Employer Needs.** Rural colleges create pathways within and across industries for their students. They are also at the forefront of breaking down long-held silos within their institutions, which can increase a college's ability to center students' needs, build seamless pathways that increase students' credential attainment and career progression, and nimbly respond to the needs of industry partners.
- **Fulfilling The Promise of Industry Partnerships by Supporting Students Holistically.** Rural community college students face systemic obstacles and affordability constraints that can impede their access and ability to complete college credentials, particularly new majority learners who juggle family and work responsibilities while focusing on their studies. College and

industry partnerships can assist students by supporting them throughout their training. Employer partners can provide much-needed funding, in-kind support, or equipment donations to expand the college's ability to support students so they can earn credentials that allow them to meet the talent needs of local employers.

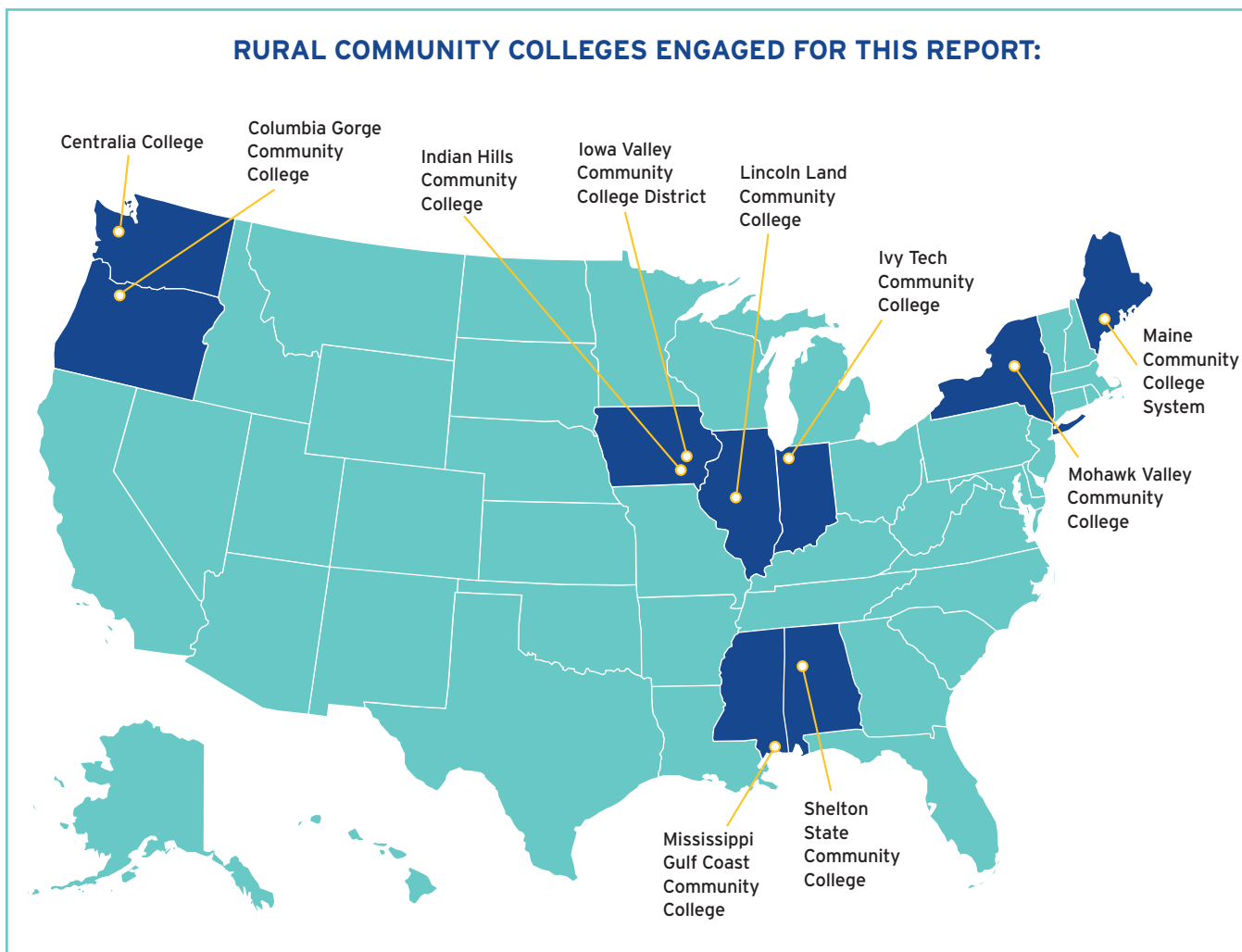
- **Using Data to Inform Decisions and Boost the Impact of Industry Partnerships.** Rural colleges use a mix of quantitative and qualitative information to evaluate the progress they are making and make data-informed decisions moving forward. Understanding the outcomes of rural college-industry partnerships, and the role that particular programs, strategies, or investments had in those outcomes, is important to inform the shape of existing partnerships and to make the case for more funding and for additional partnerships.

Policy, Funding, and Systems Implications: Supporting and Scaling What Works

As rural community college and industry partners design strategies, programs, and services that meet the workforce and economic development needs of their region,

they must center the needs of rural learners and those doing the work each day in their communities who have been left out and face structural barriers to education and good jobs. State and local policymakers, officials, and administrators can support rural community college and industry partnerships by:

- **Modernizing Investments.** Increase and modernize funding for community colleges, support and sustain rural community college industry partnerships, and invest in rural workforce ecosystems and infrastructure.
- **Centering Rural Students.** Invest in federal and student financial aid and holistic supports for today's students.
- **Expanding Capacity.** Increase rural community colleges' access to data and information and promote public-private partnerships.
- **Engaging and Listening to Rural Voices.** Bring rural stakeholders together to inform policy and funding solutions and listen to and amplify the voices of rural community members and learners.



I. INTRODUCTION

Rural America is complex and varied in its geographies, economies, cultures, and communities, as well as in its strengths, challenges, and needs. Stereotypes characterizing rural America as monolithically white and agricultural do not reflect the unique realities, histories, and assets that exist across different rural communities. Rural community members represent a mix of incomes, backgrounds, and experiences, and take a variety of pathways into college and careers, depending on the postsecondary and economic ecosystem in their region. The jobs available in rural areas span a wide range of sectors, with multinational corporations, midsize companies, farms, and small locally owned businesses dotting the landscape. With deep roots connecting them to place and each other, rural communities—and rural community colleges and industry partners—share a commitment to collaboration and innovation aimed at enabling economic development and creating opportunities for residents to thrive.

Deeply rooted in their communities, rural community colleges serve as engines of economic opportunity and equity, offering students place-based programs and pathways that lead to good jobs. They also develop dynamic and responsive industry partnerships, to ensure their workforce education and training curriculum, programs, and transfer pathways meet the needs of local employers and their rural communities.

The shared commitment among colleges, employers, and community members to creating place-based opportunities to thrive is an important lever for building on rural assets and strengths and countering the challenges that face rural America, which limit residents' access to educational and economic opportunities. Rural communities across the country experience ongoing public and private underinvestment, and rural needs have long been ignored or sidelined in federal and state policy conversations and strategies.¹ As a result, rural people and places grapple with deep inequity and social stratification, with structural barriers complicating rural learners' access to and completion of high-quality postsecondary programs that lead to good jobs in their communities.²

Given our increasingly skills-based economy, and with nearly three quarters of all jobs expected to require postsecondary education by 2031, high-quality postsecondary training and education pathways are more crucial than ever to ensure equitable access to quality jobs—especially as new industries emerge, AI and machine learning evolves, and digital skill requirements increase.³ Providing all people and communities with the necessary resources and access to postsecondary pathways that lead to careers is essential for improving collective wellbeing and building an inclusive economy—one where workers, businesses, and regions most impacted by economic shifts

and structural barriers to opportunity are empowered to equitably participate and benefit.

As research increasingly shows a tight correlation between place and one's life chances and opportunities, it is important to uplift the many efforts underway in rural communities to increase economic stability and mobility and to create thriving communities.⁴ Rural community colleges and their industry partners are at the frontline of these efforts. Effective college-industry partnerships

“
Effective college-industry partnerships can create place-based skills pathways and career opportunities that increase economic prosperity for workers and local employers.

can create place-based skills pathways and career opportunities that increase economic prosperity for workers and local employers.

This report highlights how rural community college and industry partnerships affect college access, credential completion, and career advancement, benefiting rural learners and employers alike and improving the overall

economic prosperity of rural communities. It seeks to expand awareness of the variety of rural contexts, and the state systems, investments, and policies, that can help drive and sustain effective rural community college and industry partnerships. Centered in this work is an interest in understanding how these partnerships can advance equitable opportunity and meet the needs of 'new majority learners'—adults balancing family, work, and income constraints, and who are diverse in their race, ethnicity, language, and national origin.⁵

National Skills Coalition (NSC) interviewed an array of national experts, rural community college leaders, and other partners to inform this report, in addition to a review of existing literature and lessons learned from national and regional rural community college convenings. While not intended to represent the immense diversity of partnerships and impactful work happening around the country, effort was made to learn from a range of perspectives, with hopes the findings can help render ideas and solutions that can be applied to a breadth of states, communities, and national policy efforts (for an overview of methods and a list of interviewees, see Appendix A).

Community colleges, college systems, and partners included in this project reflect a range of rural realities: centralized community college systems, decentralized and locally controlled colleges, Centers of Excellence, Historically Black College and Universities, and Hispanic-Serving Institutions, along with a range of industries, states, counties, regions, and towns with differing political, economic, and social climates.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT FOR RURAL INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

What constitutes a rural region, community, community college, or employer depends on who you ask. Definitions differ across federal and state agencies, and in public sentiment. 'Rural' aptly describes some states, counties, small towns, Native land, and frontier land. Rural regions may be remote and isolated, surrounded by coastlines,

“Regardless of how one defines 'rural,' rural people and communities display a diversity of characteristics, experiences, strengths, and challenges, despite common stereotypes that paint them as homogeneous and unchanging.”

waterways, mountains, farmland, deserts, and plains. They may be a short drive from midsize cities and large metropolitan areas. A group of rural community college students in conversation at a conference of the Rural Community College Alliance informally reflected on what 'rural' meant to them, offering that it was defined by a sense of community, their proximity to urban centers, and how readily jobs were or were not available. One student in the group stated that if there were

more than two major roads going through town, it was not rural. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), roughly fourteen percent of the U.S. population lives in rural America.⁶ Regardless of how one defines 'rural,' rural people and communities display a diversity of characteristics, experiences, strengths, and challenges, despite common stereotypes that paint them as homogeneous and unchanging.

Increasing Diversity of Rural Communities and Workers

While rural areas saw *overall* population decline during the 2010-2020 decade, the population of rural regions started to rebound in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ The 2010-2020 decade also saw an increase in the *share* of the rural population that is people of color, who make up nearly a quarter of rural residents.⁸ This decade saw growth in the rural Latino and Hispanic population. Many rural counties across the country are majority or near-majority people of color, such as in the Southeast, home to a number of majority Black counties, and the High Plains, South, and West, where near-majority Latino/a or Hispanic populations are common.⁹

Diverse Rural Economies

Rural economies are also more diverse than some realize. While agriculture dominates some rural economies, agriculture makes up a much smaller share of rural jobs than other industries. Agriculture and mining represent under ten percent of jobs in rural areas, with service industries and manufacturing comprising the majority of rural employment (over seventy percent).¹⁰ Entrepreneurialism and small businesses also play a more central role in rural economies than urban ones.¹¹

As our nation transitions to clean energy, rural regions are playing a critical role in wind, solar, and hydrogen production. Clean energy jobs play a larger role in rural regions than in urban areas, relative to the overall size of their economies, and they are growing at a faster pace.¹² A wide variety of skill sets and credentials will be required to support the supply chain, generation, manufacturing, repair, and maintenance of equipment necessary to support these emerging clean energy infrastructures and industries.¹³

Disparities Experienced by Rural Communities

As with urban and suburban communities across the states, rural regions grapple with deep inequities and social stratification. Eighty-five percent of counties with long-term, persistent poverty are rural, and in approximately a quarter of those counties, people of color make up a higher share of the population.¹⁴ Rural areas experience lower measures of income, employment, housing security, educational attainment, and life expectancy compared with metropolitan regions.¹⁵ People of color in rural areas face acute structural barriers that amplify these inequities, leading Black, Indigenous, Latino or Hispanic, Asian, and other rural residents of color to experience higher poverty rates and poorer health outcomes than their white counterparts.¹⁶

Rural learners are also less likely to have earned a college credential, and more likely to hold a high school education as their highest level of attainment, than their urban and suburban counterparts.¹⁷ The gap in rural-urban educational attainment stems in large part to the systemic barriers to education faced by rural learners, such as a lack of reliable broadband access and/or access to digital devices, limited affordable and public transportation options, and poor roads and infrastructure.¹⁸ It may also stem from memories of economic development efforts that resulted in low quality and dangerous jobs, instead of careers that offered economic security, and the perception that education could cause people to move away from their homes.¹⁹

The disparity experienced by rural communities, particularly communities of color, is not a coincidence. To understand the economic and structural causes and policy solutions for rural poverty and disadvantage, one



“
As a result, this long history of harm to workers and communities of color in rural areas can jeopardize even the best-intentioned efforts to form industry partnerships today.”

facing economic disadvantages today have a history of deep resource extraction that has been shown to have negative effects on economic prosperity, particularly for remote regions.²² Many rural areas have relied on a single resource economy, like timber, cotton, or coal, presently or in the past, which was controlled by a few people and created stratified power dynamics that often resulted in the oppression and exploitation of rural communities.²³ As a result, this long history of harm to workers and communities of color in rural areas can jeopardize even the best-intentioned efforts to form industry partnerships today.

must understand the effects of exploitative economic and labor practices from 150-200 years ago, which continue to affect rural regions' well-being.²⁰ Areas facing the deepest inequities today align with the rates of enslavement in the Southern United States.²¹ In addition, many of the rural regions

ACKNOWLEDGING RURAL CONTEXTS TO UNDERSTAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

Just as rural regions are layered and diverse in their needs and approaches, so are rural community colleges and their industry partnerships. Rural community colleges vary in size, location, and regions covered—often serving counties, small towns, and micro- or sub-communities. Rural employers also differ. Large multinational companies with thousands of employees, midsize businesses, and small family-owned and operated establishments co-exist in rural communities. There are also a host of natural resources, agriculture, education, healthcare, and public sector employers that help shape local laborsheds.

It is essential to understand this wide variation and the rich and complex history in which rural community college and employer partnerships are forged. Without recognizing the structural divestment and political neglect of entire regions, and the systemic obstacles people face in rural communities, one cannot reimagine policy, funding, and systemic solutions. Viewing rural community college and industry partnerships through this lens also allows one to see the possibilities and the transformative impact that rural community colleges and their industry partners are having on the lives of learners and in their communities.

III. RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES AS ENGINES OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND EQUITY

“

The goal is to become the primary organization that provides synergy for the Gulf Coast economy by anticipating and meeting the education needs of all constituents.

Dr. Jonathan Woodward, Executive Vice President, Teaching & Learning & Community Campus, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College

Rural community colleges are important engines of economic opportunity and equity, “not always responding to labor market demand [as much as they are] creating new economies.”²⁴ Strategic college presidents and leaders take an economic development lens to the roles their colleges play in their communities and regions. This entails creating pathways for every community member to reach their full potential and realize their college and career aspirations, including learners and workers who have been excluded from good jobs in the past, such as people of color, women, immigrants, people with low incomes, and adult learners.²⁵ It also involves intentional efforts and partnerships with employers to support the talent needs of existing businesses in their region and the development of new ones that can create jobs and economic activity that enable their communities to thrive.

Dr. Jennifer Wilson, Vice President of Business Solutions at **Indian Hills Community College** in Southeastern Iowa sees the college balance this work every day. Indian Hills is located in one of the most income-constrained areas in the state, covering two of the least resourced counties. The college has been rapidly expanding their workforce development offerings and partnerships to increase opportunity in the region, partnering with many employers to support upskilling and career advancement. Their Small Business Development Center (SBDC) also plays a key role in supporting economic vitality in the region, recognizing most employers in the region are small businesses. The services of the SBDC help to generate new career opportunities for learners and expand the college's pool of employer partners. Indian Hills offers programs designed for English Language Learners to ensure the vast skills and talent these learners and workers bring to the region can benefit local employers. Additionally, Indian Hills recognizes its own economic footprint in the area and role as an employer of choice.

On the other side of the country, this economic development takes on a different form. **Columbia Gorge**

Community College is a Hispanic-Serving Institution located along the Columbia River in Oregon, serving a bi-state area and college district that covers multiple small towns and counties featuring agricultural hubs, wind farms, and sparsely populated frontier land. The college has a significant impact on the region's economic prosperity. A report by Lightcast found that Columbia Gorge generated \$45 million in added income in their service region in fiscal year 2021-22.²⁶ This \$45 million supports 645 local jobs; one in every fifty-three jobs in the region is supported by the activities of the college and its students. This level of income production is as large as the entire Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation industry in the region—notable in an area with world-renowned windsurfing and recreation tourism.²⁷

Dr. Jarett Gilbert, Vice President of Instruction, and Robert Wells-Clark, Director of Technology and Trades, note how critical Columbia Gorge's holistic approach to career and technical education (CTE) is to this economic activity. Through its partnership with the Oregon Manufacturing Extension Program, the college's advanced manufacturing program functions as a small business incubator. They process materials, repair equipment, and work on projects for local industry—equipping students with industry-required skills and supporting economic activity in the community. Wells-Clark highlights that in two weeks alone, they generated \$28,900 in economic activity, dollars that stayed in the community, supporting local employers and their students.

IV. RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS: CREATING PLACE-BASED PATHWAYS AND OPPORTUNITY

NSC's research makes clear that effective rural community college and industry partnerships contribute to the economic prosperity of learners, employers, and communities. Strong rural community college and industry partnerships enable colleges to design curriculum and programs that map to the needs of local employers and equip students with the skills that propel them in a place-based career pathway. Rural community college and industry partnerships take on a variety of forms but can be characterized broadly by the collaboration and joint efforts of community colleges and employer partners to advance strategies, programs, and services that create place-based college and career pathways for learners, address the talent needs of employers, and benefit the local community and economy. Partnerships can and often do include a range of other stakeholders, such as leaders from economic development, workforce, and human service agencies and community-based organizations, K-12

entities, and/or labor organizations. These partnerships also tend to engage in a mix of strategic activities to create successful workforce education programs and career pathways for students and meet the needs of a diverse group of employers and industry leaders in their regions.

Strong Relationships and Leadership Buy-In

Building and maintaining strong relationships among rural community college leaders, industry partners, and other economic development and workforce stakeholders is a foundational element of rural college-industry partnerships and to generating economic vitality in regions.

“
Strategic rural colleges build relationships with business and industry leaders, political leaders, and community organizations to leverage more support and resources for students and the community.

At the top, strong relationships between college and business leadership contribute to the sustainability and durability of their partnership.²⁸ Strategic rural colleges build relationships with business and industry leaders, political leaders, and community organizations to leverage more support and resources for students and the community.²⁹ The smaller size of many rural communities can help facilitate this relationship building, as leaders

are more likely to know one another. This can lead to more seamless partnerships with business CEOs and other community partner leaders.³⁰

At the same time, these relationships do not rest with executives. Engagement at multiple levels across each

organization—vertically and horizontally—is important for sustainability, deepened communication lines, and partnership opportunities.³¹ It also ensures the community college and industry partnerships lead to tangible outcomes for learners and workers in the community.

Because many rural college leaders and institutions have existing relationships throughout their communities, rural college leaders find they have been able to offer a far more individualized approach to building industry partnerships. Even when engaging with a larger company, it is more likely that they will be connecting with someone they already know—a neighbor, former student, or a parent from their children’s school.

Iowa Valley Community College District, which covers a four-county service territory and includes two community colleges between Des Moines and Cedar Rapids, understands that partnerships are community-based. Their scale poses an advantage not only for developing relationships with businesses large and small but also in identifying the myriad ways to partner.³² Jacque Goodman, Vice President of Business and Community Solutions at Iowa Valley, describes her work as economic development, whether building apprenticeship programs with smaller local employers needing one or two apprentices or creating customized training and workforce pathways for incumbent workers at employers offering tuition reimbursement programs. Goodman says that the smaller scale of a rural community college the colleges’ advantage. Because small rural colleges are more centralized and concentrated, rural college staff wear multiple hats. This gives them a broad base of knowledge that enables them to build relationships with a range of employers, collaborate to develop comprehensive solutions through the community college, and maintain robust partnerships.

RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES PROVIDE A SOURCE OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

As the ‘living room of the community,’ rural community colleges serve as a gathering place for and natural convener of community members. For example, they frequently host cultural and sporting events, offer resources for learners and their families, and share space with K-12 students and schools, community-based organizations, human service and workforce partners, and employers. They are also often an essential provider of mental health counseling, food banks, internet access, and public transportation.³³

In offering communal space and connections to community resources, rural community colleges also bring community members onto campus, increasing awareness of the programs, services, and opportunities available at the college. Creating this sense of community belonging is especially important in the recruitment and retention of adults, students of color, immigrants, and other first-generation students.

It also attracts and intentionally engages local employers alongside other community members. By joining on-campus community events or sharing facilities with colleges, employers get a better understanding of community needs and connections to learners seeking career opportunities, while also strengthening their connections to community college leaders.

Across all partnerships and forms of engagement, college leaders seek to limit the burden placed on employers, ensuring there are not too many requests coming from too many directions (internally or externally). To aid this, strong relationship management is critical to develop and maintain employer partnerships—whether formal or informal partnership structures. Research and experience show that having streamlined points of contact for employers that help navigate and simplify communications with employers and workforce partners can benefit the partnerships and increase sustainability over time.³⁴

A survey of college employer partners conducted by the Center for Occupational Research and Development also found that ninety percent of these employers were motivated to work with colleges that had a “positive track record of working with business and industry.”³⁵ Colleges should be proactive in reaching out to employer partners to better understand their workforce needs, communicate often, and make it simple for employers to engage.

Multifaceted, Comprehensive, and Collaborative Partnership Strategies

Industry partnerships in rural communities do not simply rely on a single model or approach. Most frequently, multiple, cohesive approaches that are aligned with and part of regional economic and workforce development efforts are most effective. There are many examples of colleges convening industry, labor, economic development, and community partners—setting the table for these industry sector, regional, and employer partnerships. There are also examples of rural colleges participating in statewide or regional sector partnerships convened by economic development or workforce partners.

Rural college leaders consistently report they are not concerned with *who* sets the table. Rather, they want to ensure that community colleges are involved in local workforce and economic development conversations **from the beginning**, to leverage their role as the primary local provider of accessible workforce education and training and ensure alignment with college programs. Too often, colleges are brought in as an afterthought, which can make it more challenging to break down silos and establish cohesive workforce solutions that harness each partners’ strengths and expertise.³⁶ For college leaders, it is also essential that industry partnerships advance equitable opportunities for their students, enhance their programs, and increase economic vitality in their region.

College-led convening and approaches to partnership take on many shapes and sizes. In some regions, colleges formally lead sector partnerships or employer council efforts, with C-suite leaders across a specific industry mapping out current and future industry trends and career progression pathways in the industry.³⁷ Employer councils convened by colleges identify the required skill

sets and competencies for in-demand jobs and validate credentials of value. In other cases, colleges engage employers across different industries via career fairs, career exploration activities, and/or mentoring events and facility tours.³⁸

Lincoln Land Community College exemplifies this multipronged approach to employer engagement. Located in Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln Land covers all or part of fifteen counties, serving the largest geographic region in the state that is largely rural and includes heavy pockets of manufacturing.³⁹ The college has stepped in to create and formalize ecosystems for communication and industry engagement. Dr. Nancy Sweet, Dean of the Workforce Development Institute at Lincoln Land, explains, “our president and leadership team recognize that at times, the college has to be the one to create the table. It’s not that [the college is] missing a seat at the table. The table doesn’t exist.” As workforce education pathways and credentials became increasingly in demand after COVID, the college has increased industry engagement and expanded their program offerings and enrollments. This work includes joining sector partnership efforts led by their regional chamber of commerce or economic development partners and coming together with their sixteen different trade unions to increase pathways into construction. They also proactively engage employers at multiple levels—from C-suite executives, to human resource directors, to shift managers.⁴⁰

Colleges, rural and otherwise, convene a more targeted set of industry partners at the career and technical/workforce education program and occupation level through employer advisory committees/boards. These groups come together to offer input on college curriculum, competencies, credentials, and work-based learning models to ensure the programs are relevant and prepare students for future employment opportunities.

“

Employers are understanding that they are not at the end of the talent supply chain. They cannot just be waiting to hire talent when they graduate. Employers must be engaged throughout the process, and actively involved in recruiting and training their workforce.

Sue Griffith Smith, Vice President Advanced Manufacturing, Engineering, and Applied Science, Ivy Tech Community College

Fostering individual relationships between employers and rural community colleges is the building block for industry partnerships that meet the needs of students, college programs, and industry talent needs. They facilitate the



Individual relationships between colleges and employers help to encourage connections with workforce faculty who are working directly with students and creating the curriculum to develop technical skills.

recruitment of employers into larger partnership efforts or gain industry input into program design and the creation of career opportunities for students. They can also help to ensure that the needs of and opportunities offered by small and midsize employers are factored into program design, as larger industry convenings can sometimes overshadow their priorities.

Individual relationships between colleges and employers help to encourage connections with workforce faculty who are working directly with students and creating the

curriculum to develop technical skills. This might entail working with a large manufacturing company wanting to offer customized training for their employees, or a regional hospital looking to map out professional development opportunities and understand the college pathways available. It may mean supporting a company relocating to the area, working on a training and hiring strategy, or it could result in customized guidance and advising to a business accessing the Small Business Development Center. In turn, these individual employer-college relationships frequently increase work-based learning and job placement opportunities for students. The deepened trust, shared intent, and mutually established goals created through individual partnerships can spur new opportunities for students with employers or in industries where they may be underrepresented. College leaders describe how these individual partnerships can be a key equity strategy that can build social capital for students and help to diversify the workforce, creating connections to available quality jobs for adults of all backgrounds.

CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE: CENTRALIA COLLEGE

Centralia College is the oldest public two-year college in Washington State, located along the Interstate-5 corridor in Centralia, Washington, and offering an array of adult education, workforce, transfer, and bachelor's degrees to their rural region. Centralia is also home to the Pacific Northwest Center of Excellence for Clean Energy.⁴¹ Created in 2004 and codified in state legislation in 2009, there are twelve Centers of Excellence in Washington housed at different community and technical colleges.⁴² Each Center of Excellence focuses on specific industries that support the state's economy. This innovative model supports employers' demands for a highly skilled workforce and Washington State Community and Technical Colleges' ability to prepare work-ready graduates. The Centers of Excellence convene industry and labor to help drive workforce development initiatives, following trends in the industry locally and nationally. After labor and industry sets the direction, the Centers of Excellence then coordinate community college resources and align programming accordingly.⁴³

The Center of Excellence for Clean Energy at Centralia works closely with energy, organized labor, clean technology, Tribal Nations, workforce development boards, nonprofits, and K-20 education partners. They stay current on the state's clean energy initiatives to support the transition of power generators and users toward a zero-emission economy. Center Director Monica Brummer supports the engagement of these industry stakeholders, while also connecting the needs of her local college and diverse learners in the state. Through the Center of Excellence, Brummer is able to advocate for the policies and investments required, engaging in national conversations, and sitting on a newly formed advisory board with representatives from Department of Commerce, the State Workforce Board, industry, labor unions, and educators. Brummer is also able to ensure that the resultant strategies serve the needs of new majority learners-adults, students of color, English Language Learners, and those underrepresented in the field.

This collaborative, forward-thinking and equity-minded approach pays off. Centralia College was one of the key partners in negotiations for \$1 billion in federal funding to establish the Pacific Northwest Hydrogen Hub.⁴⁴ This work will facilitate and further public-private partnerships and collaboration among industry partners, community colleges, workforce and university partners, and labor unions. It will also intentionally support intergovernmental collaboration and partnerships with Tribal Nations in the region.



Resource Maximization across Partners to Benefit Learners, Employers, and Rural Communities

Effective community college and industry partnerships in rural regions require a comprehensive and collaborative approach, with each partner focused on supporting the economic prosperity of the region and its people. In many instances, dynamic industry partnerships extend far beyond the college and employer partners, engaging chambers of commerce, community-based organizations, local workforce development boards, economic and workforce development entities, human service agencies, K-12 districts, and/or philanthropic partners. Since rural communities may have limited resources across education, workforce development, and social services, it is even more critical that partners collaborate effectively and leverage each organization's strengths.⁴⁵ By partnering with workforce development boards and aligning with economic development agencies, colleges can develop pathways that are tailored to the local needs in their communities, leverage other funding streams, and provide a skilled talent pool that builds off of strengths in the region.

At **Shelton State Community College**, a Historically Black College and University located in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, that serves a number of rural communities, this means that the "door never closes" to partnerships and silos are dismantled in their industry partnership efforts.⁴⁶ Leaders of the adult education, workforce development, grants, and childhood development departments work hand-in-hand with the local chamber, workforce development board, the mayor's office, community leaders, and culturally-specific coalitions to support their learners, community, and local employers with anywhere from ten to 1,000 employees. As Nicole DuBose, Director of Workforce Development at Shelton State, describes it, "We are partnering left and right. By serving our employers, we are serving our students."

These comprehensive efforts can result in creative cost-sharing efforts. Many rural communities have fewer resources available and have developed industry partnerships that go beyond traditional strategies of program advisory participation, work-based learning opportunities, and hiring graduates. For example, some businesses have provided tools for students, equipment for programs, and financial support through scholarships to address the financial constraints that students face.⁴⁷ In some instances, employers have contributed to the construction of new workforce training facilities, donation of capital equipment, or hiring of additional faculty that enable the college to teach students current skills needed in the workplace and incorporate advances in workplace technology into the curriculum to better prepare students for employment opportunities.⁴⁸ These contributions can strengthen industry partnerships and strengthen connections to the community.

To reduce costs and leverage resources, some rural colleges are partnering with larger community colleges to co-offer specific workforce programs, share certain staff or operational functions, or use a consortium model to divide the costs for specific software or database systems. Partnering with other colleges in the region also has the benefit of increasing "economies of scale" for potential partnerships with industry and employers, when the numbers at one rural college would not be enough to attract their attention and meet their needs.⁴⁹

“
We are partnering left and right. By serving our employers, we are serving our students.”

Nicole DuBose,
Director of Workforce
Development, Shelton
State Community
College.

PARTNERING TO CREATE QUALITY TRAINING AND GOOD JOBS FOR RURAL WORKERS IN INDIANA

Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana offers seventy programs in over forty-five locations across the largely rural state, including many career and technical and skills training programs. With most Hoosiers staying within sixty miles of where they were born and raised, Ivy Tech focuses on industry partnerships that can create career pathways for learners where they live, learn, and work.⁵⁰ Ivy Tech has partnered with the Indiana Economic Development Corporation to secure new funding and expand industry partnerships. The partners have a shared understanding that workforce development is critical to achieving economic development goals, especially in Indiana, the country's most significant manufacturing state, with the industry representing nearly thirty percent of the state's GDP.⁵¹

Ivy Tech and their economic development partners spent nearly a year developing and solidifying relationships with Stellantis and Samsung.⁵² The two companies are partnering to form the StarPlus Energy partnership and are building two electric vehicle battery production factories. This joint venture is expected to employ 1,400 workers in rural Kokomo and its surrounding regions.⁵³ Production is anticipated to begin in 2025 at one gigafactory, and 2027 for the second. Ivy Tech's Kokomo Campus will provide the necessary training so community members can access careers at these local facilities. The economic development partners understood that the college needed a new facility to support the necessary training but could not build a new lab and facility with existing college resources. Because of the cohesive industry partnerships, demonstrated buy-in amongst stakeholders, and collaboration with economic development partners, Ivy Tech secured a grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration to develop the necessary facilities that will ultimately support rural learners, Ivy Tech, industry partners, and the economic vitality of the region and state.⁵⁴

Responsive to the Local Labor Market

Rural community colleges are adept at being flexible and responsive to the needs of their local industry and their workforce, economic development, labor, and community partners. Colleges consistently look to industry partners to validate labor market data, inform curriculum and competency development, identify or verify credentials of value, and clarify pathways for career advancement. They also look to employers to advise on broader industry and workplace trends such as emergent AI, digital, and technical skill requirements, along with the foundational 21st Century skills needed. Colleges then integrate these skills into the range of workforce education and training programs they offer, including CTE, non-degree credential programs, continuing education, professional development, and broader general education curriculum and programs. This integration is fundamental to designing quality workforce education programs and pathways that advance equity and opportunity for learners and meet the needs of local businesses.

Regional labor market information analysis and trend data are also essential to inform colleges' program design and evaluation processes, as well as their industry partnerships. This includes real-time labor market information that can pinpoint information by program code, skill needs, and existing workforce demographics. These data provide insights on which industry sectors have growth potential and which employers to prioritize partnerships with, given hiring and training needs and job quality.⁵⁵ For dynamic rural community college leaders,

labor market trends and data inform their engagement and partnerships with industry, economic development leaders, government officials, and other regional or state organizations.

Understanding the labor market allows college leaders to build proactive and systemic partnerships with employers, positioning the college as partners in problem solving.⁵⁶ Labor market information can also uncover potential opportunities, in some cases developing new industry partnership opportunities based on the strengths of the region.⁵⁷ Beyond the industry partnerships, these data validate which programs, pathways, and credentials hold most value. This is especially important for establishing quality non-degree credential frameworks and offerings, and understanding how they lead to equitable completion and career outcomes and meet the needs of local employers.⁵⁸

Leaders at **Columbia Gorge Community College** apply this comprehensive approach when developing new programs or making changes to existing offerings. Columbia Gorge analyzes labor market information and works with industry partners to identify the foundational competencies required to equip students with a "locally employable skill set tailored to local jobs," and the stackable credentials and degrees that can validate them.⁵⁹ This approach is also critical at **Lincoln Land Community College**, as they rapidly expand and develop new workforce programs. They want to meet the expectations of students and employers and keep their informal promises that college workforce programs should generate economic

opportunity for students and employers alike.⁶⁰ Since the expansion of their industry partnerships and workforce education pathways, Lincoln Land has seen exponential increases in their student enrollment and retention rates, with close to thirty percent of their students enrolled in CTE pathways and reflective of the demographics of their communities.

The scale of rural communities can also shape colleges' understanding of the local labor market and foster creative approaches. In some areas, having fewer employers in their immediate district can encourage rural colleges to use labor market information from a larger geographic region to identify broader workforce needs and opportunities.⁶¹ With the rapid expansion of remote work opportunities, employers are increasingly looking at a broader talent pool. Rural populations are a potential source of this talent.⁶² Colleges can also reach out to employers from the larger regions or nearby urban centers to engage in workforce planning to meet the skill needs of employers within commuting distance.⁶³

DATA ROADBLOCKS EXPERIENCED BY RURAL COLLEGES

Many rural colleges and national experts note challenges in accessing quantitative data on labor market supply, demand, and student outcomes. For some rural community colleges, student sample sizes are so small that much of the information is redacted. This makes it hard to fully analyze equity and impact and use the data to inform decision making and funding. For other colleges, both urban and rural, there are limited data systems to enable the tracking of employment outcomes and longitudinal effects, making it a very manual and labor-intensive process that is particularly taxing for colleges with limited personnel capacity.

In many cases, community colleges across regions have trouble accessing the data from the state that would help them understand student labor market outcomes and make informed decisions, including data that are matched to Unemployment Insurance wage records.⁶⁴ Better data from the state that enables all community colleges, including rural institutions, to know how their students fare once entering the job market, and support in making connections between industry, colleges, and the workforce system, would greatly benefit their ability to form partnerships that meet local employer demand and result in strong outcomes for learners.

Inclusive and Place-Based College and Career Pathways

Recognizing the positive impact that place-based college and career pathways have on learners and rural economies, rural community colleges are especially attuned to programs they offer that build the skills and competencies required for good jobs in their local community. To make this a reality, rural community colleges rely on effective industry partnerships that shape and support an innovative array of services, programs, and instructional modalities that result in quality credentials and degrees and lead to good jobs. In many instances, rural colleges design their services and pathways for learners who have been historically excluded from college programs and good jobs—adult learners, students of color, immigrants and English Language Learners, and women pursuing careers in male-dominated fields like advanced manufacturing, construction, and the trades. This inclusive strategy to “design at the margins,” helps to establish practices and policies that all learners can benefit from.⁶⁵

For example, Integrated Education and Training (IET), an accelerated model that pairs contextualized foundational skills such as reading, writing, math, and English language skills concurrently with technical education, allows English Language Learners, adults pursuing their high school equivalency, and other new majority learners to gain the skills and credentials needed to access good jobs, enabling employers benefit from an often-overlooked talent pool in their own communities. **Iowa Valley Community College District** offers an IET program for English Language Learners as well as a pre-Certified Nursing Assistant program that allows students to work on their high school equivalency while also working on technical education skills and credentials. Iowa Valley has also worked closely with the K-12 system to enroll both high school students and their parents in these pathways. The college is seeing remarkable success in the program, which includes learners who speak thirty to forty different languages. In the last two years, every participant that successfully completed an IET program has found employment, often because of strong industry partnerships.⁶⁶

Rural community colleges also partner with employers to offer inclusive workforce education and training programs and experiences. **Indian Hills Community College** offers adult literacy in a local meatpacking plant, in addition to college coursework options. **Lincoln Land Community College's** general education instructors partner with area employers to contextualize their general education curriculum and infuse real-world scenarios and application into their programs.

Continuing education, professional development, and incumbent worker training are key levers for rural colleges and their industry partners to offer scalable and customized options for workers to upskill and advance in their careers—while also strengthening connections with

local employers. **Shelton State** offers incumbent worker training to increase career progression and retention, offering workers English for Speakers of Other Languages courses and Spanish in the Workplace courses for supervisors interested in better supporting their multilingual and multicultural workforce. In their adult education programs, Shelton State recognizes that the GED and high school equivalency is not the end goal. They design their program so students can earn a livable wage by earning workforce certificates concurrently. In the 2022-2023 academic year, they granted 1,600 certificates to adult education students—increasing their career opportunities and supporting local employers with a skilled talent pool.⁶⁷

Rural colleges also work with industry partners to create tailored programs in in-demand fields to meet rural students where they are and also ensure local employers have access to a workforce with needed skills and credentials. At **Shelton State**, on-site Pre-K classrooms, family literacy services, and a two-generation approach provide a family-friendly environment for their parenting students. They offer a truck driving class for single mothers, a cohort training that can be completed in two months or less. Graduates leave with stackable and industry-recognized credentials and connections to local day jobs that offer family-sustaining wages and schedules that work for their families. They also take a holistic approach to serving justice-involved individuals. Shelton State has education programming in juvenile correctional facilities and participates in Second Chance program, which gives people who cannot pay their court costs a chance to enroll in workforce training at the college to earn the skills and credentials they need to secure jobs that will allow them to pay their fees and provide for themselves and their families.

Paid Work-Based Learning, Dual Credit, and Other Skills-Focused Educational Opportunities

Effective industry partnerships result in and create work-based learning, dual credit programs, apprenticeships, and other skills-based education opportunities that can boost equitable student success and expand career pathways. Implementing these approaches also benefits employers by creating an expanded pool of local candidates with experience in their industry and giving businesses the chance to train, mentor, and develop future employees.

In particular, dual enrollment opportunities for regional high school students through the community college and clear articulation agreements and transfer pathways with university partners help community members in rural settings see and easily access career pathways and “education in place” that lead to good jobs in their own communities.⁶⁸ This also helps to increase the number of learners interested in pursuing and completing the workforce education programs and credentials that industry partners have helped inform and design.

Work-based learning is another key element of a strong workforce development program informed by industry partnerships. Work-based learning opportunities increase wages post-graduation, are tied to noneconomic success and boost awareness about their career field.⁶⁹ They also

“**Effective industry partnerships result in and create work-based learning, dual credit programs, apprenticeships, and other skills-based education opportunities that can boost equitable student success and expand career pathways.**”

provide employers with a potential talent pool to hire after program completion. One way for colleges to partner to offer training and education that aligns with industry needs is through work-based learning programs that provide employers a chance to train potential workers while contributing to their learning.⁷⁰

In a rural context, paid and/or credit-bearing work-based learning, including apprenticeships, can be a valuable strategy

to help recent high school graduates, current high school students considering higher education, and new majority learners see the career opportunities that are available in their own community and the educational pathways to get there. It can help counter historical narratives that still exist in some rural communities that good jobs do not require any postsecondary education in the manufacturing, agriculture, or energy sectors.⁷¹ Similarly, paid work-based learning and apprenticeships can also counter any perception that postsecondary education would pull family members away from family responsibilities by making connections between education and local work clear while providing a wage at the same time.⁷² Many rural colleges are also finding ways to award credit for prior-learning or for work-based learning to promote student success and accelerate a student's path to completion and into employment.

Apprenticeships offer a win-win solution for rural learners and employers. Many rural colleges are increasing their apprenticeship programming and extending into nontraditional fields beyond the building trades. **Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College**, located in southeast Mississippi, offers Licensed Practical Nursing, automotive, and shipbuilding apprenticeships that map to college credentials and career placements. **Iowa Valley** is adding apprenticeship opportunities in partnership with all major hospitals and clinics in the region, thanks to a state grant that supports the related tuition and on-the-job training. The apprenticeship opportunities include part-time options for high school students, collaboration with community-based organizations to create opportunities for people experiencing poverty, and options for organizations to create pathways for advancement, to “grow

ROADBLOCKS TO ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES

While rural colleges are adept at securing, leveraging, and braiding multiple funding streams to fund their industry partnership efforts and related programs and services, the work this requires is not sustainable over the long term. This reality, combined with the potential for funding gaps due to funding volatility, limits the scaling of effective programs and practices. Adding to this challenge is the fact that not all rural colleges have the internal infrastructure necessary to apply for public and private grants, nor the staff capacity to keep up with the extensive reporting requirements and tracking of differing metrics, outcomes, and data that varies across federal, state, and local grants. Although the increase in state investments in workforce education and training programs at community colleges is a welcome trend, many of these investments fail to adequately cover the costs of attendance for students and the expenses incurred by the college to offer the programs and sustain industry partnerships—costs that go far beyond the direct instructional costs.

Many colleges point to the need to modernize the antiquated approach to funding the nation's higher education system, including state funding methodologies that are frequently based on full time equivalency (FTE) formulas. FTE formulas are based on the number of students enrolled in credit-bearing courses, rather than the overall headcount of enrolled students, which inherently disadvantages community colleges, which commonly enroll part-time students and offer an array of credit- and noncredit programs and pathways.⁷⁵ These funding formulas rarely factor in noncredit and workforce development training, making it more challenging for college leaders to equitably and consistently fund both this work and industry partnerships. This frequently puts the burden back on the student or employer to find the funding to pay for these programs.

For smaller rural colleges, this can lead to especially volatile funding cycles, where small fluctuations in enrollments can have a more significant impact on college operations. As one leader described it, this lack of stable funding leaves them “constantly scratching and clawing for money, whether for equipment or human capital, funding for faculty and navigators” to meet the needs of their learners and industry partners.⁷⁶

from within.”⁷³ **Centralia** partners with community-based pre-apprenticeship programs, employers, and unions to offer electives, remedial skill development, or the technical skill instruction required.

Braided Funding to Support Rural Community College-Industry Partnerships

Rural community colleges rely on a constellation of policies, funding, public-private partnerships, and systems to support their industry partnerships and the resultant programs and services. Frequently, to keep the college budget solvent, community colleges braid together a mix of federal, state, and local funding, in addition to raising donations and seeking grants to supplement where public investments fall short. They employ this same approach to cover the costs of college for students, to provide the financial assistance and holistic supports that students need to enroll in workforce education and training programs, and to support industry partnership efforts. Community colleges, especially in rural areas, must be creative in sourcing and braiding funds for the array of programs, services, and partnerships they offer because they have been long underfunded at both the state and federal levels.⁷⁴

Federal Funding

Community colleges receive federal funding from a mix of sources, in addition to federal student aid for tuition and fees received by eligible students.⁷⁷ These include, for example, the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, better known as Perkins V; Titles I and II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA); Department of Education (DOE) Title III Student Success grants, and American Rescue Plan Act funds. Federal grants have supported the formation of, and activities related to, implementing community college-industry partnerships. These grants include Strengthening Community College Training Grants from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and DOE. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) program and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant helps colleges provide programming, student coaching, and holistic supports to help students access transportation, tuition, fees, books, tools, and more.

Colleges use federal dollars in a range of ways. For example, **Shelton State** leverages WIOA funding, including Title II, and Ability to Benefit funds to support their adult education students in completing workforce credentials and persisting in credit-bearing certificate and degree programs.⁷⁸ **Columbia Gorge** secured funding from a USDA Rural Utilities Service Distance Learning Grant to increase the infrastructure necessary for high school

students located in the region's frontier land to be able to enroll in and access dual credit courses.⁷⁹ Through this funding, Columbia Gorge purchased Zoom remote teaching carts that were distributed pre-pandemic to these high schools. They also purchased laptops that can be checked out from local libraries, to expand access to education for adults experiencing barriers.

A major source of federal funding for community college-industry partnerships was the U.S. DOL's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program. Between 2011-2018, the TAACCCT program made an historic federal investment of \$2 billion in grants to over 700 community colleges designed to expand their capacity to offer industry-driven postsecondary education credentials that lead to careers for adult learners.⁸⁰ Grantees were required to partner with key stakeholders in their communities—including employers and industry associations—to ensure alignment with labor market demand and employer and industry needs.⁸¹

Evaluations of TAACCCT grantees demonstrate how they leveraged grant funds to support a range of activities, from building partnerships with employers and other community stakeholders, to operating training programs across a mix of industries and enhancing their capacity to support student persistence, completion, and employment.⁸² Key student success strategies implemented by colleges included, for example, career pathways programs, stackable credentials, credit for prior learning, competency-based training, and one-on-one advising/coaching. Grant funds also commonly supported strategies aimed at developing programs geared toward key employment opportunities, such as purchasing equipment for training programs, renovating training spaces to enable work-based learning, and hiring career coaches.⁸³ Building partnerships and referral pipelines to holistic supports was also an allowable use of funds, enabling colleges to connect students to, for example, child care access and transportation assistance that would help them enroll, persist, and complete.⁸⁴

TAACCCT evaluations demonstrate that, for the most part, students who benefited from grant-funded programs and services experienced positive completion, attainment, and employment and wage outcomes.⁸⁵ These evaluations provide support for the effectiveness of career pathways, work-based learning, career navigation, competency-based education, and IET for encouraging student success and employment that can meet employers' demands for skilled workers. They also indicate that continued dedicated funding to support these activities at community colleges alongside intentional employer engagement and partnerships would be an effective way to promote student success and talent development that meets' employer needs.

State Funding

State funding is the primary means by which community colleges support operations and industry partnership efforts, in addition to federal student aid.⁸⁶ In a survey by the American Institutes of Research, seventy percent of community college and industry partnerships were funded by the state to some degree.⁸⁷ State policies supporting industry partnerships tend to target educational and credential attainment and work-based learning opportunities; incentives to students or institutions; aligning data across the education and workforce systems; and supporting the convening of intermediary working groups or commissions to build shared education and workforce goals and strategies.⁸⁸

“State funding can incentivize colleges to develop new career pathways programs for students in high demand industries that include stackable credentials.”

State funding can incentivize colleges to develop new career pathways programs for students in high demand industries that include stackable credentials.⁸⁹

To help cover the costs incurred by institutions to build and maintain industry partnerships, states have passed a range of legislation that supports these partnerships directly and indirectly.⁹⁰ State policies to expand career pathways and

stackable credentials, work-based learning opportunities including registered apprenticeships, credit for prior learning, articulation agreements, and other strategies that align with state educational attainment goals can all support community colleges' ability to partner with employers and train learners for in-demand jobs. There are also examples of state investments in data tools and resources to be able to provide college program outcomes data, labor market information, and enrollment data that can help drive partnership opportunities.⁹¹

The approaches to supporting college and industry partnerships differ by state. Iowa, for example, has allocated resources for businesses to train new and existing workers through the Iowa Jobs Training Program (260F) and the Iowa Industrial New Jobs Training Program (260E) in partnership with community colleges across the state, including **Indian Hills**. The 260F program allows companies to train their existing employees with state resources through one of the fifteen community colleges across the state. The 260E program supports businesses which are creating new positions with new employee training offered by community colleges and financed through bonds sold by the colleges. In Alabama, where **Shelton State** is located, the state is very supportive of incumbent worker training and has harnessed federal COVID-recovery funds

LEVERAGING STATE FINANCIAL AID TO PROVIDE INDUSTRY-CONNECTED CAREER PATHWAYS AT MOHAWK VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Mohawk Valley Community College, located in a rural area of upstate New York, is reimagining legacy workforce training and placement strategies in response to an explosion of semiconductor manufacturing. The college is working to align and blur the lines between K-12, community colleges, universities, and workforce systems to create faster and more cohesive pathways into careers. To expand access to living wage careers for underserved populations, and meet the needs of employer partners, Mohawk Valley is scaling its FastTrack program.¹⁰⁰

FastTrack offers free short-term training experiences, offered both for credit and not-for-credit. Short programs of fourteen weeks or less are designed to jumpstart learners on the path toward a living wage career while minimizing the opportunity costs of enrolling in training. FastTrack also provides students with numerous opportunities to earn credentials through extended career pathways. FastTrack students are connected to navigators who support students while they are in training, on the job, and when they come back to advance in their education. Mohawk Valley envisions FastTrack as a long-term relationship with a student along their educational and care progression. Students enrolled in and accessing FastTrack services tend to be much more racially diverse and older than the college's traditional population, populations that have not historically accessed the college for advanced training.¹⁰¹

FastTrack is funded by braiding a range of sources, including federal, state, and apprenticeship funds, as well as significant seed funding from Oneida County. It has also received grants from Empire State Development's Office of Strategic Workforce Development and New York State's Office of People with Developmental Disabilities.¹⁰² In addition, the college is leveraging the expansion of New York State's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) to help cover students' cost of attendance. As of 2024, TAP is available to students pursuing non-degree programs leading to jobs in high demand, growing fields across SUNY and CUNY campuses.¹⁰³ This braiding happens behind the scenes so students do not have to worry about navigating a complex system and can instead concentrate on learning and training.

to cover the costs of this training, so industry partners do not incur the costs.

An increasing slate of policies and state financial aid programs that provide direct support for students also support the ability of colleges to provide the workforce education and training programs that result from and benefit industry partnerships.⁹² Many of these policies also include funding to cover a portion of the colleges' costs too, which is important to ensure colleges can offer necessary programs and services. As one community college leader shared, while they will benefit from additional funding regardless of where it originates, "all the conditions attached to the dollars makes it difficult. Our students and community would be better positioned if [community colleges] were just equitably funded for their operating budgets."⁹³

For example, at Iowa community colleges like those in the **Iowa Valley Community College District** and **Indian Hills Community College**, students and institutions benefit from the Gap Tuition Assistance Program, which provides financial aid to cover the cost of tuition, fees, direct training, books, holistic supports, and equipment, as well as access to a Gap navigator who provides academic and career guidance and connects students to other supports.⁹⁴ While Gap funds are largely geared towards direct aid and support for students, a share of the funding can be used by institutions to support colleges' provision of these activities, such as funding navigator staff positions, marketing, or equipment upgrades.⁹⁵

In addition, the **Maine Community College System**, located in a state with only two areas not considered rural, credits Maine's Free College Scholarship, signed into law by Governor Mills in 2022, with contributing to dramatically increased enrollment in short-term workforce training, bringing students and tuition dollars to Maine's community colleges.⁹⁶ The Free College Scholarship offers the high school graduating classes of 2020-2025 the ability to enroll in community college tuition-free, including enrollment in short-term workforce training programs.⁹⁷ Since 2021-2022, Maine has seen enrollment in short-term workforce training at community colleges grow by 300 percent, or 12,000 people.⁹⁸

In Illinois, where **Lincoln Land** is located, a statewide grant program called the Workforce Equity Initiative provides support to students with low incomes, seventy five percent of whom must be African American, to complete short-term education/training programs that lead to employment in high-wage and in-demand occupations. The funding helps support navigators at the college and contributes to the costs of attendance and holistic supports for students, advancing equitable access, retention, completion, and job outcomes.⁹⁹

Private Funding

Philanthropic support and public-private partnerships are also a major source of support for colleges to fill gaps in public funds to cover costs related to program offerings, maintaining industry partnerships, and supporting students. For example, **Columbia Gorge**, in addition to leveraging federal funding sources like SNAP E&T, WIOA, USDA, and TANF, seeks philanthropic support to ensure they have enough funds to provide needed student supports. Grants from the Metallica Scholars Initiative and the Roundhouse Foundation enable the college to cover the added costs of tools and other expenses that can be especially expensive and cost prohibitive for CTE students.¹⁰⁴ The funding allows students to take these tools and safety equipment with them onto their job sites once they graduate from the programs, eliminating barriers to employment.

The **Maine Community College System** has leveraged public and private partnerships to create programs that benefit learners and employers.¹⁰⁵ There are seven community colleges and four offsite locations within the system. Ninety percent of the state's residents live within twenty minutes of one of these locations. In 2021, the Community College System garnered investments to launch the Harold Alfond Center for the Advancement of Maine's Workforce. They brought in public and private funding for the colleges, including American Rescue Plan



Act Funds, resulting in a total of \$60 million to fund workforce training for entry-level, skill-up training and incumbent worker training.¹⁰⁶

To support incumbent worker training, the Maine Workforce Development Compact, including the community college system, businesses, industry associations, municipalities, and others, was established. Through this agreement, the Harold Alfond Center provides up to fifty percent of training costs for incumbent frontline workers, with the other half paid for by participating businesses.¹⁰⁷ In turn, incumbent workers are also eligible for half off up to six community college courses per year. Workers, not businesses, can choose which degree and program of study they want to pursue. Over half of the incumbent workers in the state are now represented by the Maine Workforce Development Compact.

In addition to paying for the training, the model also provides \$4 million in funding for equipment, program development and start-up costs, and personnel to colleges/programs. It also supports the system's Center staff. Dan Belyea, Chief Workforce Development Officer at the Maine Community College System, notes that "the partnership between public and private sectors is key to our success. This is working because of the statewide network we've built with dedicated personnel at the colleges, our Center staff, and the system office, who prove essential support to Compact members and students. By facilitating program and financial management, we are enhancing the capacity of our colleges and programs across the state."

“**Rural community colleges are a microcosm of the economic base of the region they represent. Philanthropy alone cannot sustain or build programming to support our rural workforce education—it takes creative partnerships. Across the country, roughly seven percent of philanthropic dollars support rural and frontier communities. While that investment is low, when used creatively to leverage additional dollars to these places, we can see successful programming, successful students, and successful communities. Everyone has their own pathway to the workforce—oftentimes a small investment in a rural community college can reduce barriers to access for students, elevate programs, open doors to additional dollars and have a huge impact on the region they are based.**”

Erin Borla, Executive Director, The Roundhouse Foundation

V. KEY SUCCESS FACTORS FOR STRONG RURAL PARTNERSHIPS

NSC's research finds that effective rural community college and industry partnerships feature, prioritize, and result in:

- Listening to rural communities and addressing the past to build trust
- Bridging siloes across industries and systems to center students and adapt to employer needs
- Fulfilling the promise of industry partnerships by supporting students holistically
- Using data to inform decisions and boost the impact of industry partnerships

Listening to Rural Communities and Addressing the Past to Build Trust

“Memory is long for these communities.

Julianne Dunn, Senior Program Officer - Workforce and Financial Prosperity, Rural LISC

The long history of harm to workers and communities of color in rural areas can jeopardize even the best-intentioned efforts to form partnerships today. In particular, the shuttering of plants, decay of social infrastructures, and loss of manufacturing and other living wage jobs loom large in the collective memory in many rural communities. Many rural regions have a long history of human exploitation and deep resource extraction—with many communities reliant on a single resource economy like timber, cotton, or coal presently or in the past.¹⁰⁸ People recall the false promises of recent years and decades, having borne witness to the aftermath of economic development efforts that resulted in low quality and dangerous jobs, instead of careers that offered economic security.

Several national experts and college leaders emphasized the need to understand rural communities' past experiences and concerns if present-day partnerships efforts are to succeed. Julianne Dunn of Rural LISC notes that the historic harm experienced by rural communities of color can get in the way of opportunities to build partnerships, especially when these histories are not addressed out in the open. For example, Tribal Nations and their land have endured significant harm from employers and may have a sensitivity and hesitation around the prospect of partnering with industry.¹⁰⁹ Rural

communities also experience mistrust and burnout due to a history of external organizations 'parachuting in' to 'help' and then abruptly leaving after superficial engagement—thus perpetuating patterns of extractive engagement.¹¹⁰

Creating new career opportunities and industry partnerships in rural areas that bear the scars of these past harms requires a nuanced approach and commitment to understanding the needs of learners, workers, and employers in the community. David Bevevino and Ben Barrett of the Aspen Institute observe that getting community colleges on board with offering new programs in advanced manufacturing, for example, can require college leaders to facilitate a grieving process that acknowledges the costs of past industry losses and enables the community to move on.¹¹¹ Community colleges and college presidents play a delicate and multifaceted role in trying to move their communities forward, attract businesses, and form partnerships, while also socializing the idea of such partnerships. They need to balance the needs of industry and the community, and support engagement from families who may have suffered harm at the hands of business and industry in the past. In some cases, this leads college presidents to turn down potential partnerships if the community is not on board.¹¹²

Dr. Leslie Daugherty of Education Design Lab describes the importance of “grassroots listening” and consistently “showing up” as essential for building trust among colleges, learners, and employers. In addition, having people who come from and represent the community lead local initiatives and develop partnerships can increase their success, as these local leaders are able to establish trust, build relationships, and identify roadblocks in ways someone coming from outside of the community cannot. This can make a major difference in the success of partnerships in rural communities of color. For example, Rural LISC saw one initiative to triple its number of participants when the leader of the initiative was a community member.¹¹³

Shelton State Community College sees this approach as foundational to their work. College leaders emphasize that they are part of the community and do not “stand apart.”¹¹⁴ They live in, work in, and reflect their community. College staff and faculty represent the demographics of their students—who range in age from four in their pre-k classrooms to ninety-two at the college—and advocate for the needs of the many diverse, smaller subcommunities of which they are part. Colleagues and partners like the West Alabama Chamber are focused on and committed to making a difference every day for their community—listening and responding to the needs of their students, local employers, and their region.¹¹⁵

Rural colleges are also mindful of language and framing. For many people, the process of pursuing higher education and going to college has been perceived as abandoning their community. There is a lot of sensitivity around population loss and the export of talent.¹¹⁶ Although rural communities generally have substantial support for their local community colleges, there is also growing distrust of higher education writ large.¹¹⁷

It can be challenging for college leaders to navigate this contrast—reinforcing support for community colleges, while also working to shift the narrative surrounding higher education. These leaders want community college to be valued for affordability and accessibility, and their responsiveness to student goals and community and employer needs. They also want to expand the perspectives of community members about who today’s college students are and ensure community colleges and the range of workforce education and training pathways available lead to good jobs and careers in the regional economy.

“RELATIONSHIPS MOVE AT THE SPEED OF TRUST”¹¹⁸

Engaging with stakeholders in rural communities to deepen awareness of residents’ and organizations’ interests, needs, and challenges can illuminate strategic partnership opportunities. It can also inform key strategies for a community college that can benefit current and prospective learners and regional employers. Education Design Lab’s BRIDGES Rural is a multiyear initiative involving five rural community colleges aimed at increasing pathways to economic mobility.¹¹⁹ The initiative uses a human-centered design process to build understanding of rural learners’ journeys and gather iterative input that leads to the formulation and piloting of solutions to local challenges.

One design insight from the BRIDGES Rural Design Challenge was that rural community colleges benefit from understanding their constituents, especially as rural population demographics continue to change.¹²⁰ At the College of Eastern Idaho, one of the five colleges involved in the initiative, they were able to reach into their smaller subcommunities, hosting a community gallery walk in the Teton Valley Business Center to seek input and better understand the needs and training opportunities in the region to inform the design of college services and programs.¹²¹ In response, the College increased its presence, services, and offerings in the community based on this feedback.

Bridging Siloes across Industries and Systems to Center Students and Adapt to Employer Needs

While being especially attuned to the needs of local employers, rural colleges also focus on creating pathways for career advancement within and across industries for their students. They take care to buffer students from the effects of economic downturns and industry fluctuations that may be felt more acutely in rural regions by preparing students with broad sets of foundational skills that can be applied in a wide variety of jobs. For example, **Ivy Tech** aligns their curriculum to the needs of industry partners to prepare students with a comprehensive set of competencies and skill sets. They identify the automated manufacturing competencies that might cross semiconductor and electric vehicle battery production, and other jobs in their regions.

At **Columbia Gorge**, they also want their education and training to bridge systems and industries. Instead of looking at programs in silos, they have identified foundational skill sets that are required across their Aviation, Advanced Manufacturing, Construction, Electro-Mechanical Technology, and Uncrewed Aerial System programs. Rather than offering standalone clean energy programs like wind energy, they ‘green’ existing curriculum—meaning they integrate clean energy and green job skills and competencies into existing programs and courses—and embed the skills into their Electro-Mechanical Technology program. In offering students a broader suite of skills, stackable credentials, and greater career options, they have increased enrollments and job placements. This approach ensures students can adapt and find good jobs, even as the workforce needs shift in the region. It also supports diversification of the workforce, as workers can move across and advance more readily with employers in their communities.

To further bridge systems, rural colleges are increasingly at the forefront of breaking down long-held silos *within* their institutions, such as those between academic, student services, and workforce divisions—blurring the lines between credit and noncredit programs. This systems transformation can increase a college’s ability to center the needs of students, create seamless pathways that increase credential attainment, and facilitate college and career progression. It can also enable colleges to nimbly respond to the needs of industry partners, especially amidst rapidly evolving shifts in technologies and skills. However, while this seamless and aligned structure has many benefits for learners and industry partners, it is important to acknowledge these structural transformations are complex and can be hindered by current federal and state funding formulas, community college administration structures (state and local), and accreditation requirements. Lessons gleaned from the rural community colleges that have undertaken this work to re-envision how colleges operate can benefit the field more broadly.

ELIMINATING SILOES AT MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST COMMUNITY COLLEGE TO ACCELERATE ECONOMIC PROSPERITY FOR STUDENTS, EMPLOYERS, AND COMMUNITIES

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College is located in southeast Mississippi, covering four counties and a range of small and midsize towns and rural areas along the coastline between New Orleans, Louisiana, and Mobile, Alabama. Their region is driven economically by several large manufacturing industries, hospitality/tourism, and banking.¹²² In addition, shipbuilding, defense, oil and gas, and port activity have a huge impact on the regional and state economy. With an abundance of industries and employers, Mississippi Gulf Coast plays a critical role in the state and regional economy by ensuring all community members have access to the training they need to secure good jobs. The needs of industry partners drive college offerings. This relationship allows local employers to have access to a diverse and skilled talent pool. Driven by the college's strategic plan, Dr. Jonathan Woodward, Executive Vice President, Teaching & Learning & Community Campus, describes a shared vision of all college stakeholders that is centered around creating economic prosperity for their students, industry partners, region, and state.

Mississippi Gulf Coast partners extensively with business and industry to design and offer relevant programs and hands-on learning opportunities.¹²³ To make this a reality, the college completely restructured the Teaching & Learning division, eliminating silos between credit and noncredit, as well as CTE and university parallel programs. Mississippi Gulf Coast is now organized into eight schools according to industry sectors. Each school includes noncredit, credit, CTE, and university parallel programs. This has streamlined their industry partnerships.

In the new model, employers engage in college advisory councils and the annual Workforce Summit during which they partner with all noncredit and credit faculty, staff, and administrators who support their sector, at one time and in one place.¹²⁴ This has also allowed Mississippi Gulf Coast to offer seamless pathways and increase the options for students to earn credit for their noncredit training and hands-on learning. The college has been able to offer innovative Licensed Practical Nursing, automotive, and shipbuilding apprenticeships that map to college credentials and career placements. They have expanded their educational offerings in correctional facilities. In addition, the Mississippi Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (MI-BEST) program leads to high school equivalency and in-demand credentials simultaneously for adult learners. By embracing emerging technology, Mississippi Gulf Coast has led statewide initiatives on cybersecurity and AI technologies; this includes training students, upskilling the current workforce, and applying cyber and AI to College operations.

Fulfilling the Promise of Industry Partnerships by Supporting Students Holistically



“A student is a student is a student. We don’t care if they are in a noncredit or credit program. We are here to support them and are working to ensure our systems are aligned to support them no matter what door they enter the college through.”

Timothy Thomas, Chief Strategy Officer, Mohawk Valley Community College

The success of college-industry partnerships also relies on investments in holistic student support services. Rural community college students face systemic obstacles and affordability constraints that can impede their ability to enroll, persist in, and complete college credentials, particularly new majority learners who juggle family and work responsibilities while focusing efforts on their studies.¹²⁵ The costs of college extend far beyond tuition and fees,

and include basic needs like food, housing, transportation, digital technology and broadband access, and child care for parenting students. These costs far outpace financial aid investments and leave many students struggling to meet their basic needs, reducing the odds that they will be able to access or complete the college credentials or programs that allow them to secure jobs with local industry partners.¹²⁶

In addition, students in rural communities often face unique constraints related to transportation, technology and infrastructure compared with their urban and suburban peers.¹²⁷ Many rural communities are spread out geographically, so students may need to travel further to attend classes on campus. Some of these communities, like some areas surrounding **Columbia Gorge Community College**, do not have access to public transportation. Personal transportation can be challenging for many learners, considering the financial costs.

Reliable broadband access and/or access to digital devices can also be limited in rural settings.¹²⁸ If rural students are struggling with transportation challenges, online or hybrid instructional delivery could be a viable



Employer partners can increase a college's capacity and provide much-needed funding, in-kind support, or equipment donations—expanding the college's ability to devote resources and staff to supporting students.

alternative to in-person classes, yet without accessible broadband, this limits opportunity. This reality is similar for high school students looking to take advantage of dual enrollment courses. Community-based organizations can provide certain resources and supports, but rural colleges and public entities may have fewer resources and limited staffing capacity.¹²⁹

College and industry partnerships can assist students in addressing these funding and resource gaps by supporting students throughout their training, from enrollment through to completion.¹³⁰ Employer partners can increase a college's capacity and provide much-needed funding, in-kind support, or equipment donations—expanding the college's ability to devote resources and staff to supporting students.¹³¹ In rare, but important, cases, employers can help colleges to provide vital supports to students that they know are essential to student success and their ability to fill in demand jobs through direct funding or lending their political influence. For example, one of the community colleges in Education Design Lab's BRIDGES cohort, Washington State College of Ohio, was able to partner with local child care partners and employers to establish non-traditional evening child care that could serve both caregivers returning to take classes and shift workers.¹³²

Rural community colleges understand the holistic needs of their students and community and find creative ways—including braiding funding and partnering with community-based stakeholders—to address their needs. For example, **Shelton State** prioritizes support for the whole family, offering access to food and other essential resources to support their students and their families. At **Centralia**, they ensure funding for wraparound student supports is factored into their grant applications. They also partner with their local workforce development board to provide student support services. **Iowa Valley** works with Mid-Iowa Community Action to support individuals with low incomes who are interested in pursuing sustainable career pathways.

Beyond the many ways that colleges and industry partners seek to provide financial assistance and holistic supports to students, navigators or coaches are also essential for student success.¹³³ All colleges interviewed for this report noted the importance of having staff who can support learners access the right programs and resources they need to access and complete college and move into

good jobs with local employers. Research supports the importance of one-on-one navigation and/or coaching for successful student outcomes. Third-party evaluations of round four TAACCCT grants, for example, identified that all of the grantees showing positive program completion, educational attainment, and employment outcomes, used grant funds to provide a dedicated staff person to support learner success.¹³⁴ These staff help students navigate college, workforce development, and social service systems to access the resources and supports they need, in addition to helping students identify career goals and deepen awareness of their chosen industry sector.

Using Data to Inform Decisions and Boost the Impact of Industry Partnerships

Understanding the outcomes of rural college-industry partnerships, and the role that particular programs, strategies, or investments had in those outcomes, is important not only to inform the shape of partnerships moving forward, but also to make the case for more funding and for building additional employer partnerships.¹³⁵ When partnerships are successful, employers can hire and retain highly skilled individuals from their local community, are better positioned to diversify their workforce, and can create clear pathways for advancement. The innovative programs, holistic supports, and skills pathways that result from industry partnerships can boost equitable college access, retention, and completion as they better respond to the needs of new majority learners looking for faster pathways to earn quality credentials and move into jobs that offer economic stability. Understanding student and program outcomes is essential to scaling what is working or changing course when gaps are identified.¹³⁶ Rural colleges use a mix of quantitative and qualitative information to evaluate the progress they are making and make data-informed decisions moving forward.

For example, Harvard University's Project on Workforce highlighted **Mississippi Gulf Coast** for their data-informed decision making.¹³⁷ The college evaluates their CTE programs using fourteen health metrics and they use quantitative and qualitative data to ensure their programs are relevant and result in positive outcomes.¹³⁸ They also use these data to make annual program development and closure decisions. The data can be disaggregated by 114 metrics, including age, race, gender, socioeconomic state, job placement, county, and more. Impressively, they put these data in the hands of their faculty and staff through a user-friendly dashboard. Faculty and staff can use this information to better understand their individual and program effectiveness, devise strategies for improvement, conduct targeted outreach, and create employer engagement strategies. This approach boosts equitable student success—supporting increased enrollment, retention, completion, and career outcomes—and supports achievement of the economic development goals and strategies that emerge from their robust industry partnerships.

Rural colleges note that qualitative and anecdotal evidence of the impact of industry partnerships plays an equally important role as quantitative data. Each day, rural college staff and faculty see and hear students lift up the transformative impact that education has on their lives and on their families—the feelings of accomplishment, hope, and new sense of possibility for generations to come. The joy and pride felt by students, parents, children, siblings, cousins, grandparents and great-grandparents at college graduations cannot be distilled on the page. In rural communities, colleges are more likely to have continuing touchpoints with former students, to hear about their career experiences and progression—and continue to inform and drive employer partnerships. At **Columbia Gorge**, for example, former students are now in manager roles and partnering with the college through their industry partnership efforts and advisory committees.¹³⁹ Word of mouth referrals and enrollments, especially in the form of family members, are another powerful indicator of a program's impact and success.

Another important outcome of rural community college and industry partnerships that is difficult to measure are the shifts in industry practices and perceptions that occur over time, resulting from relationships where trust and shared goals have been established. Most colleges have undertaken extensive efforts in the last decade to shift how they serve learners and communities. To improve outcomes and serve changing student demographics, community colleges are working to center equitable student success and design their programs and services accordingly to better meet the needs of adult learners, students of color, first generation college students, immigrants and English Language Learners, and those with income constraints. Through industry partnerships, colleges can also partner with employers to make similar shifts in the workplace to improve job quality and equity practices. They can illuminate when employers are overlooking talent and people in their communities who are seeking good jobs and opportunities for career advancement.¹⁴⁰ Colleges can help note barriers and bias in local hiring processes. They can encourage employers to eliminate the paper ceiling and arbitrary degree requirements, elevating skills-based hiring practices that can expand their talent pool and benefit their bottom line.

VI. POLICY, FUNDING, AND SYSTEMS IMPLICATIONS: SUPPORTING AND SCALING WHAT WORKS

Policies are ultimately about people—the learners, the families, the college staff and faculty, the employers, and the myriad other community members striving to create thriving rural communities. Evidence has shown that rural regions that experience economic advantage

“

As rural community college and industry partners design strategies, programs, and services that meet the workforce and economic development needs of their region, they must center the needs of rural learners and those doing the work each day in their communities who have been left out and face structural barriers to education and good jobs.

and positive wellbeing outcomes, have enacted policies that promote shared prosperity, collective wellbeing, and equitable access to education.¹⁴¹ Too often investments in rural programs and holistic supports that provide people with the resources they need to realize their college and career potential, and to be able to contribute to their local community and economy, are viewed through a zero-sum lens. To provide everyone with a fair shot to succeed does not take anything away from others—it contributes to our collective wellbeing, benefiting people, employers, and our economy.

Advancing a rural economic agenda requires understanding and addressing the deep inequities that affect rural regions and disproportionately impact people of color. One cannot advance rural development and place-based college and career pathways, without also promoting racial and economic equity.¹⁴² As rural community college and industry partners design strategies, programs, and services that meet the workforce and economic development needs of their region, they must center the needs of rural learners and those doing the work each day in their communities who have been left out and face structural barriers to education and good jobs. Rural community college and industry partnerships can also shift the narrative, to amplify that advancing equity and meeting the needs of all people allows everyone to benefit and thrive.

While there are promising practices, policies, and investments that support the efforts of rural community college and industry partnerships, too often they work *despite* our systems, not *because* of them. State and local policymakers, officials, and administrators can support rural community college and industry partnerships by modernizing investments, centering rural learners, expanding capacity, and engaging and listening to rural voices. To amplify the impact of rural community college and industry partnerships—their ability to propel equitable college access, credential completion, and career opportunities and progression to meet the needs of local employers—policy leaders should consider a slate of commonsense policies, investments, narrative shift, and systems changes to drive inclusive economies in rural communities.

Modernize Investments

- **Increase and Modernize Funding for Community Colleges:** Especially in rural communities, community colleges play a significant role in driving economic equity and opportunity in local and regional economies. The antiquated formulas for funding community colleges that are largely based on credit enrollment numbers need to evolve to meet the needs of the 21st Century, recognizing the importance of the range of education and training programs they offer. In addition, funding formulas need to factor in the additional roles that rural community colleges fill in their regions and for their students, providing essential resources and supports and serving as a community hub and convening space. They should also take into account the holistic student supports, equipment, and facilities. Additionally, funding formulas should consider the skilled faculty and coaching staff needed to prepare learners for good jobs in their local communities. Modernizing the funding mechanisms for community colleges, including providing funding for industry partnerships, is essential for driving equitable and inclusive economies where people and businesses can prosper.
- **Support and Sustain Rural Community College and Industry Partnerships:** Rural colleges need dedicated and sustained funding earmarked to support industry partnership efforts. This funding should go beyond improved investments in rural workforce ecosystems, infrastructures, and community colleges. Colleges should not have to rely on time-limited federal grants or one-time state surpluses to develop and sustain strong industry partnerships. Rural community colleges require sustainable and predictable funding to support the infrastructure, staff capacity, and equipment and program costs that are foundational for dynamic and effective industry partnerships. Flexibility and local control over these funds are also necessary to enable rural colleges to respond to the needs of their local employer partners and community, especially as new industries emerge and skill needs and career pathways evolve. Investing in and empowering rural community colleges and their industry partners to determine what is needed will ensure they can employ an aligned, multifaceted, and comprehensive approach that improves programs and services, boosting the college and career outcomes for new majority learners and advancing economic prosperity for the region's employers and communities.
- **Invest in Rural Workforce Ecosystems and Infrastructure:** Regional economic and workforce development strategies require a strong ecosystem of systems and infrastructure to allow rural community colleges and their workforce partners to capitalize on economic opportunities in ways that will benefit the local region and its residents. As a result of ongoing disparities and lack of equitable investment in rural

regions, opportunities for economic and workforce development in rural communities are too often left to luck. They become dependent on a perilous patchwork of time-limited funding or one-time tax breaks. Rural regions need sustained investment to build cohesive education and workforce training systems. They need to align these systems with strengthened support systems and infrastructure that enable working families to access postsecondary pathways and good jobs, such as child care, transportation, and housing.

Center Rural Students

- **Invest in Today's College Students:** Federal and state student financial aid is essential to realizing the positive impact of effective rural community college and industry partnerships. In addition to funding that flows directly to institutions and/or industry partnerships, direct student financial aid supports student access to college pathways and their ability to enter careers with local employers. Federal and state financial aid, however, has not kept pace with the aspirations and needs of today's students, which include help covering the costs of tuition/fees, along with expenses connected to required materials and equipment, digital technology, broadband access, books, transportation, child care, and basic needs like food and housing. Rural community college students and students pursuing short-term credential program and pathways have limited access to financial assistance and community-based resources. This makes access to federal and state-based financial aid even more essential. If students cannot access and complete college workforce programs, it does not matter how innovative and aligned they are with the local labor market and needs of industry partners.

Expand Capacity

- **Increase Access to Data and Information:** To support rural community college and industry partnerships, colleges need better access to user-friendly student and labor market data and information that allow them to take stock of student and program outcomes. Too often, labor market data are not available and data reporting tools have been focused on measuring compliance, instead of impact. Rural colleges need streamlined access to data and information that can help them understand what is working and what is not, and for whom, to inform decision making, advance equity, and boost outcomes that benefit learners, employers, and the regional economy. They need access to accurate labor market data and information, including longitudinal wage records and outcomes. Data must be easily disaggregated by learner demographics and program outcomes to help them illustrate trends across the college. Rural college staff and faculty should inform metrics, access, and usability, to ensure the data can help to measure the impact and return on



investment of their industry partnership efforts. State data systems and dashboards can help ease the burden for rural colleges, in terms of costs and capacity. They can also increase data transparency and efforts to put data into the hands of key stakeholders, including college leaders, staff, and faculty. Identifying ways to incorporate qualitative data and student voice is another important lever. It helps in understanding the role that rural community colleges play in their regions and how industry partnerships can increase economic prosperity.

■ **Promote Public and Private Partnerships:**

Understanding that public policies and investments may fall short of covering all the costs of and infrastructure required for effective rural community college and industry partnerships, public-private partnerships are an essential solution that should be promoted and incentivized. Federal grants, such as the Strengthening Community College grant, USDA Rural Infrastructure projects, or SNAP E&T programs, can encourage public-private collaboration. States can also incentivize rural employers to invest in their local communities. This can be achieved by encouraging employers to partner with their community colleges and donate their time and effort, used equipment, space and facilities, or provide funding for upskilling and scholarships. Various place-based tax and hiring incentives can be leveraged. Additionally, private philanthropy can play an instrumental role in providing unrestricted funding to spark innovation, creative solutions, and close opportunity and resource gaps for students. Private foundations should be encouraged to collaborate and allocate significant funding to support rural education and economic equity. These resources can also help to establish communities of practice and fund technical assistance, proven strategies for scaling what works.

Engage and Listen to Rural Voices

■ **Bring Stakeholders Together to Inform Policy and Funding Solutions:** Too often state policy solutions or investments are designed without the input of key stakeholders, especially those who will be impacted and involved in the implementation. To close the opportunity gaps facing rural communities, rural community colleges and their industry, economic and workforce development, and human service partners, and the learners themselves, need to be at the table to share their expertise and offer a nuanced understanding of the issues facing rural community communities and solutions required. Bringing all stakeholders together to inform state strategies and systems change efforts can reduce duplication of efforts, dismantle silos, and increase collaboration towards achieving shared goals and establishing the systems required for success. On a statewide level, it ensures that the needs of rural communities and their constituents are factored into funding allocations, policy design, adoption, and ongoing implementation and improvement.

■ **Listen to Rural Community Members and Learners:**

State policy leaders and advocates need to trust and amplify the voices of rural community college students, college staff and faculty, industry partners, and other rural economic development, human service, advocate, and community leaders. Too often, rural voices, stories, and perspectives are swallowed in national and state policy conversations and public narratives. Too often, the stories of rural regions are never told. When it

“When designing policies, programs, and systems to advance college and career opportunities and support economic development, rural learners must be centered, involved, and viewed as key partners.”

comes to supporting rural community college and industry partnerships, centering and listening to the voices of rural new majority learners and workers is essential. This helps in understanding the diversity of their needs, hopes, and aspirations and the impact that industry partnerships can have. When designing policies, programs, and systems to advance college and career opportunities and support economic

development, rural learners must be centered, involved, and viewed as key partners. Additional work is needed to continue to elevate the voices of rural community college leaders, industry partners, community stakeholders, and rural learners. Understanding the place-based solutions, innovations, and needs of rural community colleges and industry partners is key to reversing harms of the past and creating equitable economic opportunity in the future.

APPENDIX A. METHODS AND LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

National Skills Coalition (NSC) conducted interviews with leaders from ten rural community colleges and sixteen national and issue-area experts to inform this report. While not intended to represent the immense diversity of partnerships and impactful work happening around the country, effort was made to learn from a range of perspectives, with hopes the findings can help render ideas and solutions that can be applied to a breadth of states, communities, and national policy efforts. Interviewees were given the chance to review and approve content attributed to them. Interviews were supplemented with a review of existing literature on rural communities, community colleges, and industry partnerships, and interactions during and lessons learned from national and regional rural community college convenings.

COLLEGE PARTNER INTERVIEWS:

- **Centralia College:** Monica Brummer, Director, Pacific Northwest Center of Excellence for Clean Energy
- **Columbia Gorge Community College:** Dr. Jarett Gilbert, Vice President of Instructional Services, Robert Wells-Clark, Director of Technology and Trades, Katherine Raymond, Director of Workforce Development and Community Engagement
- **Indian Hills Community College:** Dr. Jennifer Wilson, Vice President of Business Solutions
- **Iowa Valley Community College District:** Jacque Goodman, Vice President, Business and Community Solutions
- **Ivy Tech Community College:** Sue Griffith Smith, Vice President Advanced Manufacturing, Engineering, and Applied Science
- **Lincoln Land Community College:** Dr. Nancy Sweet, Dean, Workforce Institute
- **Maine Community College System:** Dan Belyea, Chief Workforce Development Officer
- **Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College:** Dr. Jonathan Woodward, Executive Vice President, Teaching & Learning & Community Campus
- **Mohawk Valley Community College:** Timothy Thomas, Chief Strategy Officer
- **Shelton State Community College:** Kristen Bobo, Director of Adult Education, Nicole DuBose, Director of Workforce Development, Holly Glasgow, Director of Child Development, and Dr. Margaret Purcell, Director of Grants, with **The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama's** Donny Jones, Executive Vice President and CWO, and Sabrina Thomas, Regional Workforce Council Liaison, Alabama Department of Commerce, Workforce Development Division

ISSUE-AREA EXPERT INTERVIEWS:

- **Carla Freeman**, Senior Research Associate, Georgia Health Policy Center
- **David Bevevino**, Former Director, Research and Knowledge Management and **Ben Barrett**, Senior Program Manager, Aspen Institute
- **Dr. Darlene Miller**, Former Executive Director, National Council for Workforce Education
- **Erin Borla**, Executive Director & Trustee, and **Kathy Deggendorfer**, Founder and Trustee, The Roundhouse Foundation
- **Dr. Girard Melancon**, President/Founder, Durango Works
- **Dr. Alexandria Radford**, Managing Researcher and Senior Director, and **Helen Muhsani**, Senior Researcher, Center for Applied Research in Postsecondary Education, American Institutes for Research
- **Jennifer Freeman**, Senior Director, Jobs for the Future
- **Julianne Dunn**, Senior Program Officer - Workforce and Financial Prosperity, Workforce Development, Rural LISC
- **Dr. Leslie Daugherty**, Senior Director of Design Programs, Education Design Lab
- **Olivia Steele**, President, Jackson Area Manufacturing Association
- **Dr. Paul Hill**, Utah State University Extension
- **Steve Jurch**, Associate Vice President, Association of Community College Trustees
- **Will Durden**, Director, Basic Education for Adults, Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges

ENDNOTES

- 1 For an overview of rural development policy history, see: Olugbenga Ajilore and Caius Z. Willingham, "The Path to Rural Resilience in America" (Center for American Progress, 2020), <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/08/RuralRenaissance-report1.pdf>; Anthony F. Pipa and Natalie Geismar, "Reimagining Rural Policy: Organizing Federal Assistance to Maximize Rural Prosperity" (Brookings Institution, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Rural-Dev-Assistance-Brief.pdf>; Megan Lavalley, "Out of the Loop: Rural Schools Are Largely Left out of Research and Policy Discussions, Exacerbating Poverty, Inequity, and Isolation" (Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association, Center for Public Education, 2018), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED608842>.
- 2 Ryan Nunn, Jane Parsons, and Jay Shambaugh, "The Geography of Prosperity" (Washington, DC: The Hamilton Project, 2018), https://www.hamiltonproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PBP_FramingChapter_compressed_20190425.pdf; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Rural Education At a Glance, 2017" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2017), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/83078/eib-171.pdf?v=7729.2>.
- 3 Amanda Bergson-Shilcock, Roderick Taylor, and Nyerere "Nye" Hodge, "Closing the Digital Skill Divide" (Washington, DC: National Skills Coalition, February 6, 2023), <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resource/publications/closing-the-digital-skill-divide/>; Anthony P. Carnevale et al., "After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031" (Washington, DC: Center on Education and the Workforce Georgetown University, 2023), <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Projections2031-National-Report.pdf>.
- 4 Raj Chetty et al., "The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility," Working Paper, Working Paper Series (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2018), https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w25147/w25147.pdf.
- 5 Education Design Lab, "Who Are New Majority Learners?," Education Design Lab, 2024, <https://eddesignlab.org/newmajoritylearners/>.
- 6 James C. Davis et al., "Rural America at a Glance: 2023 Edition" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2023), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/107838/eib-261.pdf?v=7214.5>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 In Rowlands and Love (2021), "people of color" refer to individuals identifying as a race or ethnicity that is anything other than white. DW Rowlands and Hanna Love, "Mapping Rural America's Diversity and Demographic Change," *Brookings Institution* (blog), 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/mapping-rural-americas-diversity-and-demographic-change/>.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Agriculture and mining wage and salary jobs, including self-employed farmers, make up nine percent of rural employment. Manufacturing and three service industries—education and health; trade, transportation, and utilities; and leisure and hospitality—comprise of over seventy percent of rural jobs. John Cromartie, "Rural America at a Glance, 2017 Edition" (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service., November 2017), <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=85739>.
- 11 Brian Thiede et al., "Six Charts That Illustrate the Divide between Rural and Urban America," *The Conversation*, 2017, <http://the-conversation.com/six-charts-that-illustrate-the-divide-between-rural-and-urban-america-72934>; Hanna Lofdave and Mike Powe, "Rural Small Businesses Need Local Solutions to Survive," *Brookings Research* (blog), 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rural-small-businesses-need-local-solutions-to-survive/>.
- 12 Devashree Saha and Tom Cyr, "5 Graphics That Explain Clean Energy Jobs in Rural America," *World Resources Institute Insights* (blog), 2021, <https://www.wri.org/insights/clean-energy-jobs-rural-communities-us-5-graphics>.
- 13 Jeannine LaPrad et al., "Unprecedented Opportunity: Meeting the Workforce Demands of New Clean Energy, Manufacturing, and Infrastructure Investments" (Washington, DC: National Skills Coalition, 2024), https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/DataBrief_infrastructure_NSC_BGA_final.pdf.
- 14 Persistent poverty is defined by the USDA Economic Research Services as counties in which "twenty percent or more of the population had poverty level household incomes in each of the last four decennial Census years." Davis et al., "Rural America at a Glance: 2023"; Center on Rural Innovation, "The Equity of Economic Opportunity in Rural America," *Rural Aperture Project* (blog), 2023, <https://ruralinnovation.us/blog/equity-economic-opportunity-rural-america/>.
- 15 Davis et al., "Rural America at a Glance: 2023," National Center for Education Statistics, "Educational Attainment in Rural Areas." Sally C. Curtin and Merianne Rose Spencer, "Trends in Death Rates in Urban and Rural Areas: United States, 1999-2019" (Hyattsville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, 2021), <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db417.pdf>; Thiede et al., "Six Charts That Illustrate the Divide between Rural and Urban America;"
- 16 Cara V. James et al., "Racial/Ethnic Health Disparities Among Rural Adults – United States, 2012-2015," *MMWR Surveillance Summaries* 66, no. 23 (November 17, 2017): 1-9; Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Data Show U.S. Poverty Rates in 2019 Higher in Rural Areas than in Urban for Racial/Ethnic Groups," 2021, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=101903>; Stacy Grundy and Beth Prusaczyk, "The Complex Intersection of Race and Rurality: The Detrimental Effects of Race-Neutral Rural Health Policies," *Health Equity* 6, no. 1 (April 28, 2022): 334-37.
- 17 National Center for Education Statistics, "Educational Attainment in Rural Areas" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, October 2022), <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/lbc/educational-attainment-rural?tid=1000>.
- 18 Ashton Cain et al., "A Snapshot of Broadband Access in Rural Communities" (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/broadband_special_topic_brief_jan2023.pdf; Office of Planning, Environment, & Realty, U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, "Rural Areas Planning," 2017, https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/publications/rural_areas_planning/page03.cfm.

- 19 Julie Johnson, "BRIDGES Rural Design Insights, Part 1: Understanding the Potential of Rural Community College Learners" (Washington, DC: Education Design Lab, 2021), https://eddesignlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/EDL_BRIDGESRural_DesignInsightsPAGES_June2021.pdf.
- 20 Thor Berger, "Places of Persistence: Slavery and the Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States," *Demography* 55, no. 4 (August 2018): 1547-65.
- 21 Kathryn J. Edin, H. Luke Shaefer, and Timothy J. Nelson, *The Injustice of Place: Uncovering the Legacy of Poverty in America* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2023).
- 22 J. Tom Mueller, "Natural Resource Dependence and Rural American Economic Prosperity From 2000 to 2015," *Economic Development Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (August 1, 2022): 160-76.
- 23 Alex Tammaro, "How Economic Exploitation Shaped America's Landscapes of Disadvantage | Urban Institute," *Urban Wire* (blog), 2024, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-economic-exploitation-shaped-americas-landscapes-disadvantage>; Edin, Shaefer, and Nelson, *The Injustice of Place*.
- 24 David Bevevino and Ben Barrett, Aspen Institute, College Excellence Program, Interview, July 26, 2023. Note: As of the publishing of this report David Bevevino is no longer with the Aspen Institute.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Lightcast, "The Economic Value of Columbia Gorge Community College" (Moscow, Idaho: Columbia Gorge Community College, 2023), https://www.cgcc.edu/sites/default/files/news/documents/CGCC_MainReport.pdf.
- 27 Hood River News, "A Look Back at 20 Years of Windsurfing in Hood River," *Columbia Gorge News*, 2002, https://www.columbiagorgenews.com/archive/a-look-back-at-20-years-of-windsurfing-in-hood-river/article_68ff2767-393b-57c8-9da6-565ded4601b9.html; Lightcast, "The Economic Value of Columbia Gorge Community College;" Mid-Columbia Economic Development District, "Columbia Gorge Economic Development Strategy" (The Dalles, OR: Mid-Columbia Economic Development District, 2022), https://assets-global.website-files.com/622e8847cde037798a8d0e62/642dd8a1d47c5265f96f022_MCEDD-CEDS_2022-27_Full_Strategy_2023Update_web.pdf.
- 28 Brittney Davidson et al., "Aligning Talent and Opportunity: An Employer Guide to Effective Community College Partnership" (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, 2019), <https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/employerguide/>.
- 29 Ben Barret et al., "Rural Community College Excellence: A Guide to Delivering Strong Opportunity for Students and Communities" (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, 2023), https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Aspen_RuralCommunityCollegeExcellence_Spring2023.pdf.
- 30 Storey Dyer Kloman et al., "Improving Workforce Outcomes for Rural Community College Students: A How-to Guide for Rural Community College Workforce Partnerships" (Boston, MA: Social Finance, 2020), <https://socialfinance.org/insight/improving-workforce-outcomes-for-rural-community-college-students/>.
- 31 Melissa Leavitt and Elaine W. Leigh, "Employer and Community College Partnerships: Models and Practices for Supporting Students and Strengthening the Workforce" (Indianapolis, IN: Strada Education Foundation, 2023), https://stradaeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Strada_EmployerCommunityPartnership_Landscape_Report.pdf.
- 32 Jacque Goodman, Iowa Valley Community College District, Interview, January 4, 2024.
- 33 Rachel Rush-Marlowe, "Strengthening Rural Community Colleges: Innovations and Opportunities," *Association of Community College Trustees* (Washington, DC: Association of Community College Trustees, 2021), <https://www.acct.org/sites/default/files/documents/2022-12/Strengthening%20Rural%20Community%20Colleges%202021.pdf>.
- 34 Leavitt and Leigh, "Employer and Community College Partnerships."
- 35 CORD, "A Look at Partnerships Between Employers and Community and Technical Colleges: Observations and Recommendations" (Waco, TX: Center for Occupational Research and Development (CORD), 2021), https://www.cord.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/cord_emc_report_2021.pdf.
- 36 Julianne Dunn, Rural LISC, Interview, August 25, 2023.
- 37 CORD, "A Look at Partnerships Between Employers and Community and Technical Colleges: Observations and Recommendations."
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Interview with Nancy Sweet, Lincoln Land Community College, Interview, February 1, 2024.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Pacific Northwest Center of Excellence for Clean Energy, "About the Center of Excellence for Clean Energy," n.d., <https://www.cleanenergyexcellence.org/about-the-coe/>.
- 42 Carolyn McKinnon, "Centers of Excellence" (Olympia, WA: Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, 2023), <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/about/facts-pubs/centers-of-excellence.pdf>.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Office of Clean Energy Demonstrations, "Regional Clean Hydrogen Hubs Selections for Award Negotiations," Energy.gov, n.d., <https://www.energy.gov/oced/regional-clean-hydrogen-hubs-selections-award-negotiations>.
- 45 Johnson, "BRIDGES Rural Design Insights, Part 1."
- 46 Nicole DuBose, Margaret Purcell, Kristen Bobo, and Holly Glasgow, Shelton State Community College, Interview, February 16, 2024.
- 47 Barret et al., "Rural Community College Excellence."
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 David Bevevino and Ben Barrett, Aspen Institute, College Excellence Program, Interview, July 26, 2023.

- 50 Sue Griffith Smith, Ivy Tech Community College, Interview, October 31, 2023.
- 51 National Association of Manufacturers, "Manufacturing's Share of Gross State Product" (Washington, DC: National Association of Manufacturers, 2018), https://www.nam.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/MFG-GSP-FactSheet_201810.pdf.
- 52 Sue Griffith Smith, Ivy Tech Community College, Interview, October 31, 2023.
- 53 Stellantis, "Stellantis, Samsung SDI Announce Kokomo, Indiana as Site for Second U.S. StarPlus Energy Gigafactory," Stellantis.com, 2023, <https://www.stellantis.com/en/news/press-releases/2023/october/stellantis-samsung-sdi-announce-kokomo-indiana-as-site-for-second-us-starplus-energy-gigafactory>.
- 54 EDA Public Affairs Department, "U.S. Department of Commerce Invests \$500,000 to Boost Advanced Manufacturing Training Opportunities and Jobs in North Central Indiana," U.S. Economic Development Administration, 2023, <https://www.eda.gov/news/press-release/2023/03/29/us-department-commerce-invests-500000-boost-advanced-manufacturing>.
- 55 Kloman et al., "Improving Workforce Outcomes."
- 56 Davidson et al., "Aligning Talent and Opportunity."
- 57 Barret et al., "Rural Community College Excellence."
- 58 Lindsey Reichlin Cruse et al., "The Non-Degree Credential Quality Imperative" (Washington, DC: National Skills Coalition, 2023), <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resource/publications/the-non-degree-credential-quality-imperative/>.
- 59 Dr. Jarett Gilbert, Robert Wells-Clark, Katherine Raymond, Columbia Gorge Community College, Interview, September 2023.
- 60 Nancy Sweet, Lincoln Land Community College, Interview, February 1, 2024.
- 61 Barret et al., "Rural Community College Excellence."
- 62 Johnson, "BRIDGES Rural Design Insights, Part 1."
- 63 Kloman et al., "Improving Workforce Outcomes."
- 64 Jennifer Freeman, Jobs for the Future, Interview, September 19, 2023.
- 65 Johnson, "BRIDGES Rural Design Insights, Part 1."
- 66 Jacque Goodman, Iowa Valley Community College District, Interview, January 4, 2024.
- 67 Nicole DuBose, Margaret Purcell, Kristen Bobo, and Holly Glasgow, Shelton State Community College, Interview, February 16, 2024.
- 68 Rush-Marlowe, "Strengthening Rural Community Colleges."
- 69 Nichole Torpey-Saboe, Elaine W. Leigh, and Dave Clayton, "The Power of Work-Based Learning" (Indianapolis, IN: Strada Education Network, 2022), <https://stradaeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/031522-PV-report.pdf>.
- 70 David Fuller and Manjari Raman, "The Partnership Imperative: Community Colleges, Employers, and the Skills Gap" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School, 2022), <https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/research/The%20Partnership%20Imperative%2012.12.2022.pdf>.
- 71 Barret et al., "Rural Community College Excellence."
- 72 Johnson, "BRIDGES Rural Design Insights, Part 1."
- 73 Jacque Goodman, Iowa Valley Community College District, Interview, January 4, 2024.
- 74 Nikki Edgecombe, "Public Funding of Community Colleges" (New York, NY: Community College Research Center, 2022), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/public-funding-community-colleges.html>; Victoria Yuen, "The \$78 Billion Community College Funding Shortfall" (Center for American Progress, 2020), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/78-billion-community-college-funding-shortfall/>.
- 75 Yuen, "The \$78 Billion Community College Funding Shortfall."
- 76 Nancy Sweet, Lincoln Land Community College, Interview, February 1, 2024.
- 77 The majority of federal funding for higher education comes from federal Pell Grants and other aid that covers tuition, fees, and other eligible costs of attendance for students. Anne Stauffer et al., "Two Decades of Change in Federal and State Higher Education Funding: Recent Trends across Levels of Government" (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2019), https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2019/10/fedstatefundinghigheredu_chartbook_v1.pdf.
- 78 The Ability to Benefit provision in the Higher Education Act (HEA) allows people without a high school diploma or equivalent to qualify for federal financial aid for postsecondary education when they participate in an eligible career pathway. Federal Student Aid, "Ability to Benefit Frequently Asked Questions," Knowledge Center, 2021, <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/electronic-announcements/2021-01-15/ability-benefit-frequently-asked-questions-ea-id-ope-announcements-21-02>; Nicole DuBose, Margaret Purcell, Kristen Bobo, Holly Glasgow, Shelton State Community College, Interview, February 7, 2024.
- 79 Dr. Jarett Gilbert, Robert Wells-Clark, Katherine Raymond, Columbia Gorge Community College, Interview, September 2023.
- 80 David Judkins et al., "Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training: Round 4 Early Outcomes Study Report" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Office, 2020), https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/ETA_TAACCCT_Round4_Outcomes-Study-Report_December2020.pdf.
- 81 Lauren Eyster et al., "TAACCCT Approaches, Targeted Industries, and Partnerships," The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant Program Brief 3 (Washington, DC: Income and Benefits Policy Center, Urban Institute, 2017), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/89331/2017.02.08_taaccct_brief_3_final_v2_2.pdf.
- 82 Judkins et al., "Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training."
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 Eyster et al., "TAACCCT Approaches, Targeted Industries, and Partnerships."
- 85 Grant Blume et al., "Estimating the Impact of Nation's Largest Single Investment in Community Colleges" (Washington, DC: Center of

- Education & Labor, Education Policy, New America, 2019), <http://newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/estimating-impact-taacct/>.
- 86 Stauffer et al., “Two Decades of Change in Federal and State Higher Education Funding: Recent Trends across Levels of Government.”
- 87 Alexandria Walton Radford et al., “Mapping the Opportunities: How Industry-Led Public-Private Partnerships Are Engaging Postsecondary Institutions to Benefit Employers, Postsecondary Institutions, and Students” (Arlington, VA: American Institutes for Research, 2023), <https://ilpp.org/Industry-Led-report.pdf>.
- 88 Sarah Pingel, “State Workforce Development Policies” (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 2020), <https://www.ecs.org/state-workforce-development-policies/>.
- 89 Leavitt and Leigh, “Employer and Community College Partnerships.”
- 90 For a scan of state policies supporting sector partnerships—which may or may not include colleges—see: https://dcworks.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcworks/publication/attachments/Sector_Partnership_Policy.pdf.
- 91 Leavitt and Leigh, “Employer and Community College Partnerships.”
- 92 Stephanie M. Murphy, “A Typology and Policy Landscape Analysis of State Investments in Short-Term Credential Pathways” (Austin, TX: HCM Strategists, 2023), <https://hcmstrategists.com/resources/a-typology-and-policy-landscape-analysis-of-state-investments-in-short-term-credential-pathways>.
- 93 Timothy Thomas, Mohawk Valley Community College, Interview, October 27, 2023.
- 94 “Gap Tuition Assistance Program,” Iowa Department of Education, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://educate.iowa.gov/higher-ed/community-colleges/iowa-skilled-worker-job-creation-fund/gap-tuition-assistance-program>.
- 95 Ibid.
- 96 Interview with Dan Belyea, Maine Community College System, Interview, December 20, 2023.
- 97 “Free Community College Extended for Two More Years,” Maine Community College System, July 11, 2023, https://www.mccs.me.edu/press_release/free-community-college-extended-for-two-more-years/.
- 98 David J. Daigler, “2023 Annual Free College Report” (Augusta, ME: Maine Community College System, 2023), <https://www.mccs.me.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023-Free-College-Report.pdf>.
- 99 Lincoln Land Community College, “Workforce Equity Initiative at LLCC,” Lincoln Land Community College, 2021, <https://www.llcc.edu/workforce-equity-initiative>; Workforce Equity Workforce Equity Initiative, “Workforce Equity Initiative,” Workforce Equity Initiative, n.d., // www.illinoiswei.org.
- 100 For more information about the FastTrack Program, visit: <https://www.mvcc.edu/fast/>.
- 101 Unpublished White Paper, n.d. “Reimagine, Redesign, and Restore: Transforming the Mohawk Valley’s Education and Workforce Development Systems,” Mohawk Valley Community College; Timothy Thomas, Mohawk Valley Community College, Interview, October 27, 2023.
- 102 Ibid.
- 103 Presentation by Timothy Thomas at Credential as You Go Network Conference, September 21, 2023; New York State, “Governor Hochul Announces Launch of Tuition Assistance Program Eligibility for SUNY and CUNY Workforce Development Programs | Governor Kathy Hochul,” New York State, 2024, <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-announces-launch-tuition-assistance-program-eligibility-suny-and-cuny>.
- 104 The Metallica Scholars Initiative is supported by the All Within My Hands Foundation and implemented in partnership with the American Association of Community Colleges. Learn more at: <https://www.allwithinmyhands.org/who-we-support/metallica-gives-back/metallica-scholars.html>. The Roundhouse Foundation is a private philanthropic organization that invests in the communities and workers of the rural Pacific Northwest. Learn more at: <https://roundhousefoundation.org/>. Erin Borla and Kathy Deggendorfer, The Roundhouse Foundation, Interview, November 3, 2023.
- 105 Interview with Dan Belyea, Maine Community College System, Interview, December 20, 2023.
- 106 “Maine Workforce Development Compact,” Maine Community College System, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.mccs.me.edu/workforce-training/maine-workforce-development-compact/>.
- 107 “Harold Alfond Center Workforce Development Funding,” Division of Lifelong Learning - University of Maine, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://dll.umaine.edu/harold-alfond-center-workforce-development-funding/>.
- 108 Edin, Shaefer, and Nelson, *The Injustice of Place*.
- 109 David Bevevino and Ben Barrett, Aspen Institute, College Excellence Program, Interview, July 26, 2023.
- 110 Julianne Dunn, Rural LISC, Interview, August 25, 2023.
- 111 As of the publishing of this report David Bevevino is no longer with the Aspen Institute. David Bevevino and Ben Barrett, Aspen Institute, College Excellence Program, Interview, July 26, 2023.
- 112 Ibid.
- 113 Julianne Dunn, Rural LISC, Interview, August 25, 2023.
- 114 Nicole DuBose, Margaret Purcell, Kristen Bobo, Holly Glasgow, Shelton State Community College, Interview, February 7, 2024.
- 115 Ibid.
- 116 Leslie Daugherty, Education Design Lab, Interview, June 28, 2023.
- 117 Megan Brenan, “Americans’ Confidence in Higher Education Down Sharply,” Gallup, July 11, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508352/americans-confidence-higher-education-down-sharply.aspx>.
- 118 Leslie Daugherty, Education Design Lab, Presentation at the Rural Community College Alliance Conference, September 2023.

- 119 Education Design Lab, "BRIDGES Rural," Education Design Lab, 2024, <https://eddesignlab.org/project/bridgesrural/>.
- 120 Johnson, "BRIDGES Rural Design Insights, Part 1."
- 121 Education Design Lab, "Rural Revival: BRIDGES Rural College Transformation Insights" (Washington, DC: Education Design Lab, 2023), https://eddesignlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/EDL_BRIDGES-Transformation-Profiles_Nov2023.pdf.
- 122 Dr. Jonathan Woodward, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College Interview, February 16, 2024.
- 123 Ibid.
- 124 Ibid.
- 125 CCCSE, "Mission Critical: The Role of Community Colleges in Meeting Students' Basic Needs" (Austin, TX: CCCSE, 2022), https://cccse.org/sites/default/files/Mission_Critical.pdf.
- 126 Lauren Bell, "College Affordability Still Out of Reach for Students with Lowest Incomes, Students of Color," IHEP (blog), August 16, 2023, <https://www.ihep.org/college-affordability-still-out-of-reach-for-students-with-lowest-incomes-students-of-color/>; CCCSE, "Mission Critical."
- 127 Johnson, "BRIDGES Rural Design Insights, Part 1."
- 128 Emily Vogels, "Some Digital Divides Persist between Rural, Urban and Suburban America," Pew Research Center, August 19, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/19/some-digital-divides-persist-between-rural-urban-and-suburban-america/>; Janessa M. Graves, Demetrius A. Abshire, Solmaz Amiri, and Jessica L. Mackelprang, "Disparities in Technology and Broadband Internet Access across Rurality: Implications for Health and Education," *Family & Community Health* 44, no. 4 (2021): 257-65.
- 129 Barret et al., "Rural Community College Excellence."
- 130 Katie Brown, "Powerful Partners: Businesses and Community Colleges" (Washington, DC: National Skills Coalition, July 2018), <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Powerful-Partners-Businesses-and-Community-Colleges.pdf>.
- 131 Leavitt and Leigh, "Employer and Community College Partnerships."
- 132 Leslie Daugherty, Education Design Lab, Interview, June 28, 2023.
- 133 Leavitt and Leigh, "Employer and Community College Partnerships."
- 134 Judkins et al., "Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training."
- 135 Davidson et al., "Aligning Talent and Opportunity."
- 136 David Bevevino and Ben Barrett, Aspen Institute, College Excellence Program, Interview, July 26, 2023.
- 137 Robert B. Schwartz and Rachel Lipson, *America's Hidden Economic Engines: How Community Colleges Can Drive Shared Prosperity* (Harvard Education Press, 2023).
- 138 Dr. Jonathan Woodward, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College Interview, February 16, 2024.
- 139 Dr. Jarett Gilbert, Robert Wells-Clark, Katherine Raymond, Columbia Gorge Community College, Interview, September 2023.
- 140 "Assessing Your Employer Partnerships" (Sandra Grace Counseling & Consulting Services, n.d.), <https://ctecolab.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/Assessing%20Your%20Employer%20Partnerships%20-%20practitioner%20.pdf>.
- 141 Edin, Shaefer, and Nelson, *The Injustice of Place*.
- 142 Pipa and Geismar, "Reimagining Rural Policy."

© 2024 National Skills Coalition. All rights reserved.

National Skills Coalition
1250 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036

National Skills Coalition fights for inclusive, high-quality skills training so that people have access to a better life, and local businesses see sustained growth. We engage in analysis and technical assistance, organizing, advocacy, and communications to improve state and federal skills policies. Learn more at nationalskillscoalition.org and follow us @skillscoalition.

