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New Study: COVID-19 Threats to Rural Colleges Imperil Underserved Communities

Funding Shortages Limit Access to Education, Challenge Local Economies

Wilmington, NC - A new study on the impacts of rural public colleges has found that the stress of COVID-19 to these institutions' finances is endangering the economies, healthcare and upward mobility of the communities they serve. The groundbreaking work from Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges ([ARRC](#)), a research collaboration between four universities, shows that the number of [low employment counties](#) served by rural public colleges would increase by 50% without the jobs these colleges provide.

ARRC found that, of the 118 rural public colleges it examined ([see the interactive map](#)), most were bracing for state budget cuts, reducing hours for workers, furloughing employees, freezing vacant positions, and laying-off workers. The study also found that these institutions were often the largest employer in their communities and provided college-educated workers for high-demand jobs despite

facing below-average resources.

“Rural public colleges are anchor institutions in their regions,” said **ARRC co-director Dr. Andrew Koricich**. “These colleges serve as critical access points to postsecondary education preparing teachers, nurses, and other essential workers for the local economy. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take a heartbreaking toll, especially in rural places, the long-term strength and vitality of rural public colleges is crucial to ensuring opportunities for economic advancement at both the individual and community level.”

In 2018 alone, rural public colleges granted over 16,000 degrees in health professions and related degrees and over 13,000 teaching degrees, according to ARRC’s research.

In addition, enrollment at rural public colleges increased by 150,000 students between 2003 and 2018, contrary to narratives around shrinking enrollments for these institutions. Combined with a higher enrollment share of Pell grant students and adult learners, this data highlights the role these colleges play as access institutions for rural Americans. As many post-secondary schools become more exclusionary and expensive, rural public colleges buck this trend by accepting all or a vast majority of students and maintaining affordability.

“Rural public colleges are the exact opposite of ivory towers,” said **University of Denver Assistant Professor Dr. Cecilia Orphan**. “They are totally enmeshed in the lives of their rural communities. The accessibility and embeddedness is what makes rural public colleges the economic engine of their regions and exactly why our national policy response to COVID-19 must prioritize these institutions.”

Given rural communities’ unequal access to broadband, lower educational attainment, and slow economic recovery following recessions, ARRC makes policy recommendations to strengthen the ability of rural public colleges to fulfill their missions. Specifically, the research consortium advocates for the creation of a Rural Serving Institution federal designation that would provide grants to support their comprehensive mission and basing future stimulus funding on student headcount, not full-time equivalent enrollment, among other recommendations.

ARRC’s research is funded by the Joyce Foundation and will continue to explore the role of rural public colleges over the months to come. Sameer Gadkaree of the Joyce

Foundation explained, “The essential role of rural public colleges — sustaining local economies and providing educational and economic opportunity to their community members — does not receive the attention it deserves. The Joyce Foundation is therefore proud to support ARRC’s efforts to shine a light on the value of these colleges and recommend specific federal policies to strengthen them.”

For Cheryl Lovell, president of Adams State University, this type of research brings her hope, sharing that it “advances the cause, purpose, and desire for regional, public, rural institutions like Adams State University which our nation so desperately needs.”

[Link to Executive Summary](#) | [Link to Full Report](#) | [Link to Interactive Map](#)

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The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges is a research collaborative and resource hub with the mission of increasing appreciation for and understanding of regional colleges and their contributions to opportunity and community wellbeing.

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