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ARRC Partners with Ascendium to Develop Rural-Serving Definition

Rural colleges are often critical to the wellbeing of rural communities, with some campuses dedicating significant resources to serve their regions. But researchers' efforts to document those contributions are limited by the fact that there is no definitive way of identifying which institutions are rural-serving. The **Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges** (ARRC), a collaboration between leading higher education scholars at four universities, received a \$428,000 grant from Ascendium Education Group to address this problem.

Andrew Koricich, an associate professor at Appalachian State and co-director of ARRC, is leading the project. "A longstanding obstacle for improving policymaking, philanthropy, outcomes, and peer networking for colleges that serve rural populations has been the difficulty in clearly identifying the group of institutions doing this important work," he explained. To tackle the problem, ARRC will develop an evidence-based definition and accompanying list of public and private rural-

serving institutions. This definition will describe the various ways rural colleges serve their communities in order to highlight the work that these institutions are doing.

A group of rural-focused researchers and college leaders will collaborate on developing the definition. ARRC plans to publish the list, as well as resources on how to use the definition in policy and research, on their website for anyone to use for free. On the website, people will be able to view data on rural-serving institutions and create their own lists of universities using various definitions of rurality. Future convenings will share the definition of what it means to be a rural-serving institution and generate interest in researching them.

Supporting rural postsecondary education and workforce training is an investment priority for Ascendium Education Group. **Danielle Vetter**, senior program officer at Ascendium, shared they are “excited to support a talented team of researchers through this initiative to expand research on how institutions can better support rural learners in their postsecondary education journey.” Vetter explained that “creating a clear definition of rural-serving can lead to valuable information sharing, best practice identification, and, ultimately, stronger learner outcomes across campuses. It’s our hope that researchers, policymakers, campus leaders, and our philanthropic peers can all benefit from this important work.”

The project will occur in four phases over the next year, with the goal of making it easier to research rural-serving colleges and one day have the definition acknowledged and used by the federal government. This designation could make it easier to target rural-serving institutions with resources and ultimately strengthen rural communities across the country. **Vanessa Sansone**, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio and ARRC Research Fellow, said, “It’s exciting to think about how this project will build a better understanding of rural-serving institutions and the contributions they offer students and rural communities.”

Joining Koricich and Sansone on the project are ARRC co-directors **Alisa Hicklin Fryar** of the University of Oklahoma, **Cecilia Orphan** of the University of Denver, and **Kevin McClure** of the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

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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