Executive Summary

Regional public universities and colleges (RPUs) are public institutions that are vital postsecondary access points for many Americans. Research indicates that RPUs are leaders in promoting upward mobility, educating an estimated 47% of bachelor’s-degree-seeking students attending four-year public institutions. The research described in this report finds that RPUs educate 58% of Black or African Americans, 47% of American Indian or Alaska Native students, 35% of Asian American students, 39% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students, 44% of Hispanic or Latino students, and 44% of multi-racial students attending four-year public institutions. RPUs additionally play an important role in educating first-generation college students and those receiving Pell grants; on average, 37% of RPU students are Pell grant recipients. RPUs are also vital anchor institutions that contribute to their regions.

Despite their crucial role in expanding educational opportunity throughout P-20 education and supporting regional wellbeing, foundational knowledge is lacking about how to identify and define RPUs and there is no official list of RPUs. As a result, sector-wide quantitative data and research are nearly nonexistent, and RPUs and their students experience ongoing invisibility in scholarly and policy discussions. This research study used cluster analysis, a statistical method for identifying groups of similar objects in datasets, to create a list of RPUs. This study also contributed a companion dataset to support future research about these important institutions. Finally, this research study provided key insights about the students that RPUs serve.
Key Findings

Our analysis identified 474 RPUs that enroll 3.8 million full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment students and 5.1 million students (inclusive of part-time students). The average FTE enrollment of RPUs is 7,796 and the average headcount enrollment is 10,987.

Twenty-nine percent of the RPUs identified in this report meet the enrollment thresholds for Minority Serving Institution status, and 49% are Rural-Serving Institutions as identified by ARRC. RPUs spanned nine Carnegie Classifications, including institutions designated as “mixed baccalaureate/associate’s” and “very high research activity.”

On average 26% of RPU students attend part-time as compared with 14% of non-RPU students. More than 21% of the degrees conferred by the PRU sector are graduate degrees. RPUs enroll a higher proportion of in-state students than non-RPUs on average, 85% of RPU students are state residents as compared with 72% of non-RPU students.

RPUs serve counties that have higher needs than those served by non-RPUs, including counties that are designated as having low education, low employment, and persistent poverty. RPUs are more likely to serve counties designated as having low education than non-RPUs.

Across revenue sources, RPUs have fewer resources with which to educate their students and serve their regions. On average, RPUs receive $1,091 less per FTE enrollment in state appropriations than non-RPUs, yet state appropriations represent a larger proportion of the RPU budget. On average, RPUs. The average RPU receives $9 million from the federal government in grants and contracts as compared with the $208 million that the federal government gives non-RPUs. RPUs also have fewer endowment assets than non-RPUs; on average, RPUs have $28,968 less per FTE in endowment assets than non-RPUs. As a result of these funding disparities, RPUs have, on average, fewer tenured faculty, full-time instructional, research, and public service staff per FTE than non-RPUs.

RPUs tend to be more affordable than non-RPUs; the average annual tuition and fees for RPUs is $8,896 as compared with $12,325 for non-RPUs.
Applications for the Field

Policy applications. With a list of RPUs and better understanding of the sector’s contributions to postsecondary access and regional wellbeing, policymakers have an opportunity to leverage policy and funding to better support the sector in achieving state and federal policy goals. Of key importance to ensuring that RPUs can support policy goals is addressing the significant funding disparities that they face.

Research applications. For far too long, RPUs have been under examined in qualitative and quantitative research due partly to the absence of a list of RPUs. Researchers may use this list and dataset to study the sector, which will promote greater understanding about RPUs and their students.

Practice applications. RPU leaders may use the dataset and interactive ARRC map to identify institutional peers, and use the findings from this report to advocate for better policy and funding for their institutions.

Philanthropic applications. Grant makers and philanthropists are often focused on supporting postsecondary institutions that promote college access and attainment and community wellbeing, and this report shows that RPUs share this mission. Funders may use this list to identify RPUs to fund.