

Challenges and Opportunities for Rural Community Colleges

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Over half of all public community colleges are designated as rural (Cejda, 2010). These institutions are in a precarious situation in which they are expected to serve some of our nation's most neglected communities. Rural students often face barriers such as lack of resources, low-performing secondary schools, poor preparation in high school, lack of tradition and precedence in attending college, and limited technology connectivity (Scott et al., 2016). According to MDC (2003), rural community colleges also must contend with high drop out rates (p. 7) while a survey by Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public (HSPH) found that “four in ten rural parents of children over age 18 (43%) say their children have moved out of their local community.” MDC (2003) goes on to say, “[rural communities] often struggle to combat the sense of powerlessness that comes from absentee ownership of land and resources, a one-industry economy, [and] high dependence on government programs and transfer payments” (p. 7).

Many of these issues are systemic, meaning community colleges won't be able to fully address the root causes on their own. However, by educating community members and advocating on their behalf, rural community colleges can make begin to make progress in these communities. This paper examines the challenges faced by rural community colleges, as well as explores various initiatives, programs, and services rural community colleges are offering to overcome these challenges in order to advocate for social justice and community improvement.

Challenges

Many rural communities are defined by their economic drivers, such as “coal country” and “steel country” (Buckwalter et al., 2019). As society and technology have evolved, many of these one-industry economies have been left behind. This is not a recent issue. In *The People Left Behind: A Report*, the 1967 report on rural poverty commissioned by President Lyndon B.

Johnson, states “[Rural poverty] affects some 14 million Americans. Rural poverty is so widespread, and so acute, as to be a national disgrace...” (United States & Breathitt, 1967, p. 9). This number equates to 25% of the rural population, almost double that of the urban poverty rate (University of Wisconsin–Madison Institute for Research on Poverty, 2020).

Over 50 years after Johnson’s *The People Left Behind*, systemic issues such as low incomes, high unemployment, low educational attainment, poor housing, and malnutrition (United States & Breathitt, 1967) continue to plague rural communities. A notable symptom of these issues found in many students is a lack of confidence, lack of cultural capital, and a lack of cognitive development (Hlinka, 2017). As such, community must offer remediation to assist students as they transition to higher education while also working to rectify and reform the underlying systemic issues originating from generational poverty.

Many of the issues that affect communities also can slow growth and progress within the institution. One such challenge is attracting and retaining qualified faculty. Cejda (2010) lists issues such as the rural environment, finances, hiring process, and socialization as primary blockers in recruitment and retention. Reports indicate that “the lack of cultural, social, shopping, and recreational amenities in rural areas” (Cejda, 2010) creates major disadvantages for these institutions. Furthermore, due to the struggling economies in the communities, many institutions find themselves unable to offer salaries that are competitive with their urban and suburban counterparts. Maldonado (as cited by Cejda, 2010) reported an average salaries of \$46,535 at rural-serving institutions, \$59,960 at suburban-serving institutions, and \$55,942 at urban-serving institutions. If community colleges are to make a concerted effort to help these communities, attracting the best faculty and staff must be a priority.

No discussion of rural communities and the challenges would be complete without addressing diversity, and social inequality. According to MDC (2003), “The more divided a community is along lines of class and race, the more difficult it is to start and sustain a collaborative, comprehensive development effort” (p. 10). HSPH found that “44% of Latinos living in rural areas say they think Latinos are discriminated against in their local community,” while 36% of African Americans living in rural areas also report being discriminated against. Notably, the issues of discrimination does not end at race, it also can encompass political affiliation. HSPS goes on to report that “37% of adults who identify as liberals say liberals face discrimination in their local community.” These statistics all demonstrate that infighting amongst rural communities is prevalent, and any social justice reform in these communities will need to be all-encompassing.

Lastly is the issue of cultural capital along with community and family values. According to Hlinka et al. (2017), rural students report that “community and family values of education” can fall short in their push to attend and complete college. Furthermore, the report notes that “students are challenged with possessing cultural capital that enables them to overcome the pull of family obligations” (Hlinka et al., 2017). These two sentiments are often misunderstood or misrepresented. Critics often suggest that rural students are unmotivated. Cejda (2010) reported faculty dismay regarding the lack of motivation displayed by students attending rural community colleges. However, the issue is not motivation, but one of upbringing, values, and the local culture. Hlinka et al. (2017) reports one student's thoughts on familial obligations:

“Everyone has their certain job they have to do and if something else gets in the way of that, well, it'll just have to. One or the other has to be chosen. There's no way to go here and go there at the same time. You can't do both. It's just a kind of pull. [And if it came

down to studying for your math final versus visiting someone [in the hospital?]. Yeah. You're going to visit."

The concept of familial obligation is deeply ingrained in most rural communities. At the core of this issue is cultural capital. Cultural capital is described by Bourdieu (1985) as "A person's education (knowledge and intellectual skills) that provides advantage in achieving a higher social-status in society." This is demonstrated by the conflict of priorities many rural students face when balancing school and family.

Several other non-educational barriers also prohibit rural community college students. These include a lack of child-care services, reliable transportation, financial aid (Bell et al. as cited by Scott et al., 2009), and inadequate internet access (Scott et al., 2009). Issues such as these present immediate barriers, therefore they serve as immediate needs for rural community colleges to address. The next section will explore several ways these issues are currently being addressed, as well as opportunities that exist to further the mission.

Opportunities

Often rural community colleges are a pillar of the community. As such, they are especially capable of advocating and implementing change, social justice, and community outreach. The desire for a better future is persistent in these communities. HSPH (2018) reported "The top two approaches that rural Americans believe would be very helpful to improve their local economy are creating better long-term job opportunities (64%) and improving the quality of local public schools (61%)." Addressing both of these issues would not only benefit the community, but also the institution's education, recruitment, and retention efforts.

Community colleges can have a large impact on local employment. Crookston & Hooks (2012) found that communities with an established community college experienced significantly

more job growth than those without. Some of this burden falls onto the national and state governments to provide funding; Crookston & Hooks (2012) note, “Counties where state appropriations for community colleges fell the fastest suffered significant decreases in employment.” It does seem that efforts are being made, particularly towards these programs. Michael Pastor, workforce training director for Gila Community College, states that while funding can be severely lacking in many areas, “We do receive workforce development funding, which is really beneficial to a community college like ours” (Bosch, 2018).

One program aiming to improve employment opportunities is the CCC2WORK program offered by Coconino Community College. This program offers “affordable pathway to skilled jobs in science, nursing and emergency services” (Bosch, 2018). Additionally, CCC partners with local hospitals and first responders to provide job opportunities for nursing and EMT students (Bosch, 2018). There are many other programs such as this one, aiming to partner with local business of all industries in order to provide a clear professional pathway for students and recent graduates. These programs are vital in addressing the employment issues faced by rural communities. Buckwalter & Togila (2019) stress this importance when stating that a core responsibility of rural community colleges “ includes partnering with workforce organizations, adult basic education, and a variety of other community-based organizations to provide adults and non-traditional learners with supportive, streamlined, educational pathways toward family-sustaining jobs.”

Another important partnership is that of community colleges and local secondary institutions. Orr (2019), noted that these collaborations typically focus on the following goals: raising standards, professional development, and curriculum and program development; educating students, parents and educators about the changing labor market; increasing the

perceived value of post-secondary education; and simplifying students' transition. Orr (2019) goes on to state that, "This commitment to improving the public schools as well as their own institutions seemed to be critical for fuller integration of the community colleges and secondary schools in forging a seamless transition system." By partnering with secondary school and other community educational institutions, community colleges can ensure that area children are meeting all the developmental milestones necessary to a successful college experience.

Alleman & Holly (2013) state that the "barrier of qualification is the foremost hurdle that must be cleared," when considering how to interest students in postsecondary education.

Alleman & Holly (2013) go on to list several ways that these hurdles can be alleviated by community colleges: offering tutoring services to secondary students, supplying mini-grants to help secondary teachers fund their classroom efforts, offering supplementary learning experiences, and harnessing the social networks, particularly of underrepresented groups, to spread information. Low-income students in particular can struggle from the lack of exposure to higher education. Many of these students have never considered life after high school, or they harbor unrealistic expectation (Alleman & Holly, 2013). In such cases it is vital that community colleges work with secondary schools to provide education and advising on all matters of higher education, including academics, financial aid. Doing so will help ensure students enter higher education equipped for success.

One program that works to bridge the gap from high school to community college is the dual-credit program offered by Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS). The dual-credit program offers high school students to enroll in courses that will count for both college and high school credit (Roggow, 2014, p. 7). This gives students a head start, motivates them to continue earning credits, and saves future tuition dollars. Bronx Community College

(BCC), while not rural, is another example of successful partnership between a community college and local secondary institutions. BCC launched a new Criminal Justice Program with the aim of supporting Hispanic high school students earn an associate's degree and subsequently transition into a four-year institution. Through a dual-enrollment initiative, an investment in supplemental instruction (tutoring, workshops, peer-mentoring, etc.), and various other academic support tools, BCC found their program to be a huge success in serving a historically at-risk population (Roggow, 2014, pp. 27-28).

Last, but perhaps most importantly, is the issue of social justice and diversity. Peterson (2016) illustrates this point in the following passage:

“Outside of the large urban areas, many of us in the United States live in areas where most people around us look, speak, and act like we do. Generally, we, as a human species, have protected ourselves for thousands of years by living with people who are like us. We often speak using “us” versus “them” and don’t understand the “other.” When we are encounter people who are not like us, things can get sometimes get uncomfortable.”

Creating spaces that are inclusive can provide many rural community members the opportunity to interact with people from different cultures and backgrounds, removing the “us” versus “them” mentality. Snow College, located in the predominantly white town of Ephraim, UT, works to bring diversity to the community by offering exchange programs, actively recruiting students from different states and countries, and features a Center for Global Engagement (Peterson, 2016). Peterson (2016) notes that something as simple as “having a classmate, teammate or roommate from another culture or country can be a life-changing experience.”

It should be noted that surface-level seminars and training sessions are not suffice in undoing the injustice in these communities. According to MDC (2003), “having a seat at the table is not enough – silent interests must be encouraged to have a voice and to participate fully in the work.” Addressing issues such as inclusion, equity and power must take the center of any rural community college’s mission. Coahoma Community College, located in rural Mississippi, achieved this by campaigning and supporting a local minority team leader in their bid for state legislature (MDC, 2003). Additionally, community colleges can promote civic engagement by partnering with sites that allow students to critically understand their community social issues, developing learning outcomes that account for community needs, and providing opportunities for students to reflect and synthesize their experiences (Roggow, 2014, pp. 38-42).

Conclusion

Many systemic issues face rural communities, slowing or outright preventing economic and social growth. Rural community colleges, with careful consideration, funding, and partnerships, can work to address many such issues, lifting their communities up. While generational poverty and economic depression is at the center of much of this discussion, social justice for black, indigenous, people of color, and LGBT communities must not be overlooked. Rural communities are often identified as non-inclusive spaces. A commitment to equity and justice in these communities will dismantle the outside perceptions of these rural communities, as well as prepare residents for today’s global society.

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