

National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda



Introduction

Though national postsecondary education and workforce training outcomes have drawn growing attention in recent decades, very little of that attention has gone toward rural postsecondary education and learners. The data that exist related to rural postsecondary education attainment are also extremely limited, and the experiences of learners from rural communities receive scant attention. Increasingly, practitioners, researchers and philanthropic organizations in the rural postsecondary education and workforce training space have called for the advancement of a national rural postsecondary research agenda to fill this critical gap.

This research agenda, produced through the collaborative effort of a diverse group of researchers and organizations, and with support from [Ascendium Education Group](#) (Ascendium), focuses on generating knowledge that can help practitioners and policymakers remove systemic barriers faced by rural learners at two- and four-year institutions. Specifically, it aims to lay the groundwork for applied research collaborations that **1) center equity, 2) focus attention on systemic and structural issues affecting student success from enrollment through workforce entry, 3) have true salience for rural communities and learners, especially learners from low-income backgrounds and 4) yield actionable insights in one to three years.**

There are many important topics and questions to explore in the realm of rural postsecondary education and learner experiences, and this research agenda does not attempt to cover them all. Instead, it aims to complement ongoing research in the K-12 and postsecondary education spaces, including the [National Rural Education Association Research Agenda](#). The research agenda is also guided by Ascendium's core goals of improving learner persistence, timely degree completion, labor-market advancement and upward socioeconomic mobility and its focus on the rural learner journey from enrollment to job placement. Ascendium has invested in the development of two tools to explore and define "rural-located" and "rural-serving" institutions. This research will be available in late 2021 for researchers to use within future projects. You can visit Ascendium's website to learn more about this work and other investments.

Centering Equity

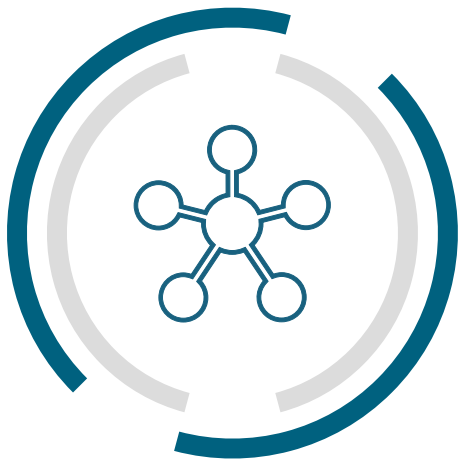
Disparities in postsecondary outcomes and experiences exist between rural and non-rural learners, as well as within the diverse population of rural learners. To pursue equitable outcomes for all rural learners, it's critical to identify and understand the disparities and the structures that create barriers to success for different groups of learners. Research projects guided by this research agenda will be most impactful if they center equity by:

- Considering the relationship between learner experience, student success measures and the intersectionality of rural learner identity. This includes factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, first-generation college attendance, military status, immigration status and other contextually relevant factors.
- Attending to racialized inequities for Black, Latino, Native American, Indigenous and some groups of Asian learners.
- Considering socioeconomic status and improving outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds without eclipsing explicit attention to racialized inequities in opportunity and outcomes.
- Actively elevating learner voice and perspective and the inclusion of qualitative data collection and analysis alongside quantitative research.



National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda Framework

The research agenda explores four critical focus areas to help build field understanding of the many factors influencing rural learner success — especially learners from low-income backgrounds — in postsecondary education and entry to the workforce. Each focus area is closely related to the others, aiming to explore the challenges and opportunities for rural learner success from different perspectives. The focus areas can be thought of like lenses into rural education — starting from the widest-angle view, with a look at institutions in their communities, and narrowing to a close-up on learner perspectives and experiences.



The Rural Institution as a Catalyst for Mobility and Economic Growth



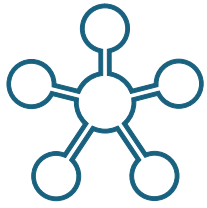
Capacities for Effective Service and Innovation at Rural Institutions



The Rural Student Learning Journey



The Value of Postsecondary Education for Rural Learners



The Rural Institution as a Catalyst for Mobility and Economic Growth

CONTEXT:

Rural postsecondary institutions often serve as a local community's largest employer, cultural and community hub and workforce development pipeline, among their many roles. They are core to rural community vitality and can play an important role in drawing attention, people and resources to rural areas. Relative to postsecondary institutions in non-rural areas, rural postsecondary institutions often play an outsized role in their communities. The questions in this research focus area aim to explore the extent to which that role connects to rural learner success.



GUIDING QUESTIONS:

1. What are the various roles that rural postsecondary institutions play in their communities or regions? What relationship does the role rural postsecondary institutions play have with rural learner success as measured by persistence, completion and job placement?
2. In what ways do rural postsecondary institutions build social and cultural capital in their local area? How do rural postsecondary institutions' social and cultural capital in their communities or regions affect rural learner persistence, completion and job placement?
3. How do employers perceive the value of credentials or certificates from rural postsecondary institutions? What is the association, if any, between employers' perceptions and rates of rural postsecondary institution attendance and rural learner persistence, completion and job placement?
4. How do rural postsecondary institutions work with local partners to provide opportunities that contribute to learner persistence, completion and job placement? What are the key benefits of these partnerships to rural postsecondary institutions, partner organizations and learners?



Capacities for Effective Service and Innovation at Rural Institutions

CONTEXT:

In response to rapidly changing learner needs, technologies, workforce demands and funding and regulatory environments, postsecondary education institutions are being called upon to innovate — finding new and sustainable ways of increasing student success and meeting the needs of core stakeholder groups. Human, data and strategic planning and execution capacities are among the key institutional needs to innovate and deliver effective service in today's changing landscape. The research questions in this focus area aim to explore rural institutional capacities, how to build those capacities and the extent to which those capacities affect rural learner persistence, completion and job placement.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

1. How do rural postsecondary institutions develop, recruit and retain the talent and expertise required to effectively respond to changing program and learner needs?
2. How do rural postsecondary institutions build their capacity for collecting and using data? What is the association between data capacity at rural postsecondary institutions and learner persistence, completion and job placement?
3. How do capacities in areas like institutional research, academic research and grant writing affect rural postsecondary institutions' ability to implement changes to improve rural learner persistence, completion and job placement?
4. How do rural institutions create the conditions to engage in long-term strategic and financial planning in support of their student success priorities?





The Rural Student Learning Journey

CONTEXT:

Rural contexts frequently have different learner needs, institutional capacities and community assets than the large, non-rural institutions that often drive postsecondary education innovation and research on best practices. Research in this focus area aims to explore what academic and non-academic practices and policies help to improve rural learner persistence, completion and job placement in rural contexts.



GUIDING QUESTIONS:

1. What types of first-year experiences, programs and supports (e.g., tailored orientations, student success courses, corequisite remediation) have the greatest impacts on rural learner persistence?
2. What are the effects of a large-scale redesign of the learner experience (e.g., implementation of math pathways or integrated advising) on rural learner persistence, completion and job placement?
3. Are early momentum metrics¹ effective indicators of student success for rural learners? What other early indicators predict rural learners' postsecondary progress and completion, as well as labor market success?
4. How do rural postsecondary institutions modify high-impact practices in teaching and learning and integrated student supports to fit local contexts and institutional resources?

¹ Belfield, C., Jenkins, D., & Fink, J. (2019, July). Early momentum metrics: Leading indicators for community college improvement. Early Momentum Metrics: Leading Indicators for Community College Improvement. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/early-momentum-metrics-leading-indicators.html>



The Value of Postsecondary Education for Rural Learners

CONTEXT:

The value of postsecondary education has been increasingly tied to economic opportunity and wage gains for graduates. This narrative shapes how postsecondary institutions attract, educate and graduate learners. Yet, we are challenged to define and measure private and public value and to deliver equitable value to all learners. Research in this focus area aims to contribute to an ongoing conversation about postsecondary value by exploring value in rural contexts, including the interplay of value with identity and learner persistence and completion.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How do rural learners think about and define the value of their postsecondary education, and how does that change over time and after completion of their credential?
2. What programs, interventions or conditions at rural postsecondary institutions are associated with different perceptions of the value of postsecondary education from the perspective of rural learners?
3. Does postsecondary education position rural learners to pursue the professional, personal and civic opportunities they value? What skills, knowledge, networks and relationships — gained during college — do recent graduates identify as important to their current work, lives and communities?
4. What is the value of rural postsecondary credentials to rural learners in terms of broadened economic or job opportunities?

THE COMPLEXITY OF DEFINING & MEASURING VALUE

Understanding and unpacking the value of postsecondary education for rural learners and communities is enormously complicated. While the economic return on education for rural learners is a vital piece of the value puzzle, it is not itself a comprehensive measure of value.

Other considerations for defining and measuring value may include less tangible benefits, including those accruing to a community, personal growth, social mobility, health and wellness benefits and more.

Research projects that are aligned to this agenda should offer approaches to defining and measuring postsecondary value that reflect the complexity of “value” and that are contextually and culturally relevant to rural learners from different backgrounds.

Examples of Existing Research on Rural Postsecondary Education

Chambers Crystal Renée, & Crumb, L. (2021). *African American rural education: college transitions and postsecondary experiences*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

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Goldman, A.-M. (2019). Interpreting Rural Students' Stories of Access to a Flagship University. *The Rural Educator*, 40(1). <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v40i1.530>

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Hillman, N. (2019, May 21). Place matters: A closer look at education deserts. Third Way. <https://www.thirdway.org/report/place-matters-a-closer-look-at-education-deserts>

Hlinka, K. R., Mobelini, D. C., & Giltner, T. (2015). Tensions impacting student success in a rural community college. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 30(5), 1-16. <https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/30-5.pdf>

Holt, B. (2011). Identity matters: the centrality of 'conferred identity' as symbolic power and social capital in higher education mobility. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(9), 929–940. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2011.580458>

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Schmitt-Wilson, S., Downey, J., & Beck, A.E. (2018). Rural educational attainment: The importance of Context. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 33(1), 1-14. <https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/33-1.pdf>

Wright, C. J. (2012). Becoming to remain: Community college students and post-secondary pursuits in central Appalachia. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 27(6). <https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/27-6.pdf>

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The development of this research agenda was facilitated by Sova in close partnership with Ascendium's Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training team.

Ascendium is working to change postsecondary education and workforce training systems so that all learners have equitable opportunities for socioeconomic mobility. Ascendium grantmaking focuses on removing systemic barriers faced by learners from low-income backgrounds, especially those in historically underrepresented groups: first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans. To learn more about Ascendium's strategy and investments in rural postsecondary education and workforce training, go to: www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org.

Sova's mission is to help America fulfill its social contract to provide real upward mobility for more people through higher education. Anchored in a commitment to improving the lives of working people, Sova works shoulder to shoulder with researchers, policymakers and institutional leaders at all levels to close equity gaps in opportunity and outcomes for today's learners. To learn more go to: www.sova.org.