

THE RURAL MALE IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGES CAN IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL MEN

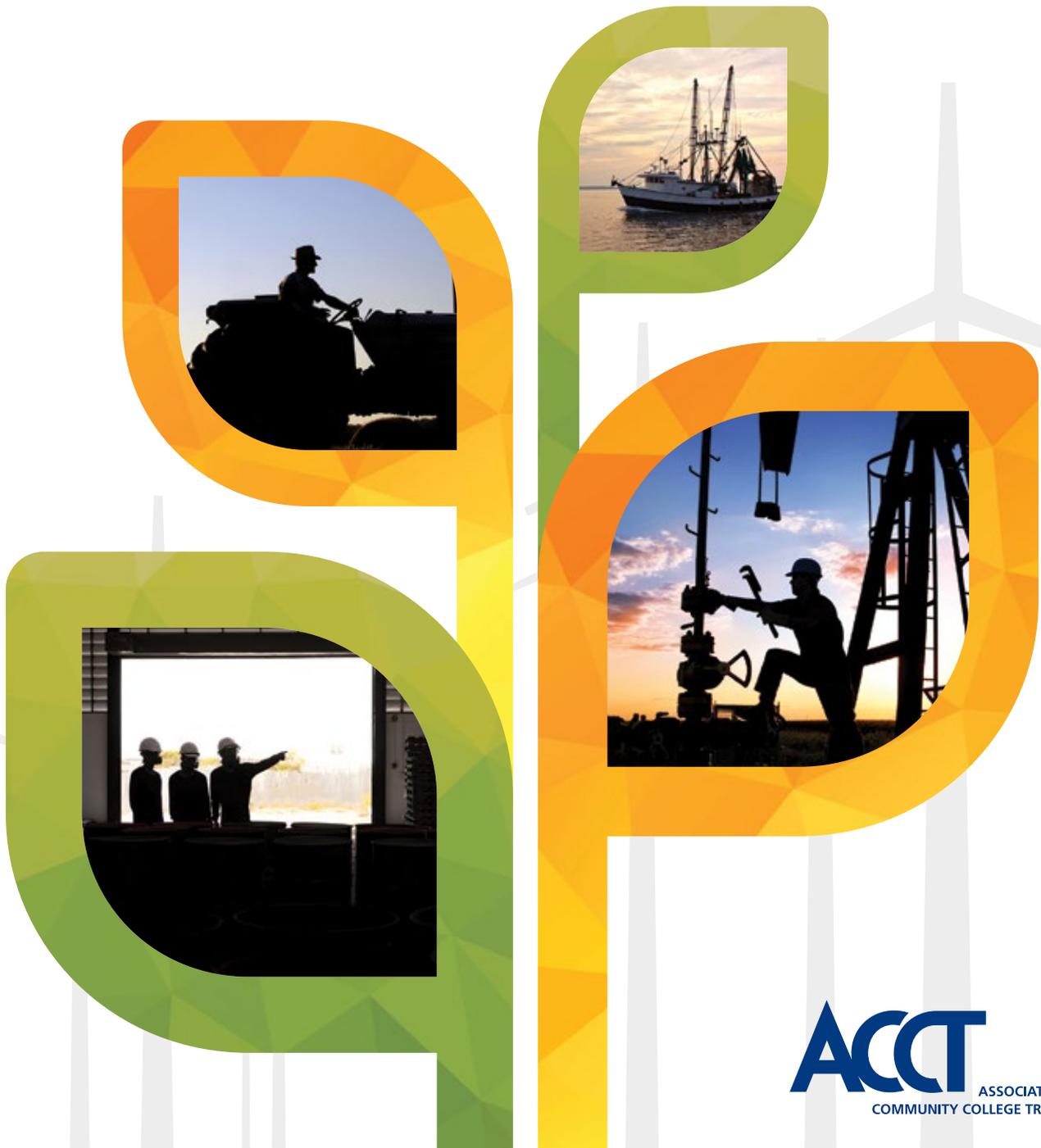




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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. economy continues to recover from the Great Recession in important ways; notably, the national unemployment rate has decreased from a high of 10 percent in late 2009 to 4 percent as of July 2018.¹ However, a closer look reveals that most rural communities have not fully recovered. Lagging educational attainment—particularly among men—is a significant impediment to prosperity in rural communities. Community colleges are key players in reversing this trend but must help their male students overcome significant logistical, academic, and personal hurdles.

This issue brief summarizes the economic conditions in rural communities since the Great Recession and highlights the educational attainment of rural men. It then describes the barriers to attending college that rural men face and these promising efforts that Hinds Community College and the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) have undertaken to help men gain the knowledge and skills they need to compete in the modern workforce:

- Both institutions use scholarships to encourage students to enroll and complete their studies. Simply getting students on campus can have a tremendous impact on their long-term success.
- Both institutions recognize that students need guidance and assistance once enrolled, such as with mentors, apprenticeship programs, and wrap-around services to support basic needs.
- Both institutions have crafted programs with the goal of finding students jobs in high-demand fields in their home state.

LCTCS and Hinds exemplify the work that rural community colleges are and should be doing to assist this important population and serve as an important model for other rural institutions.

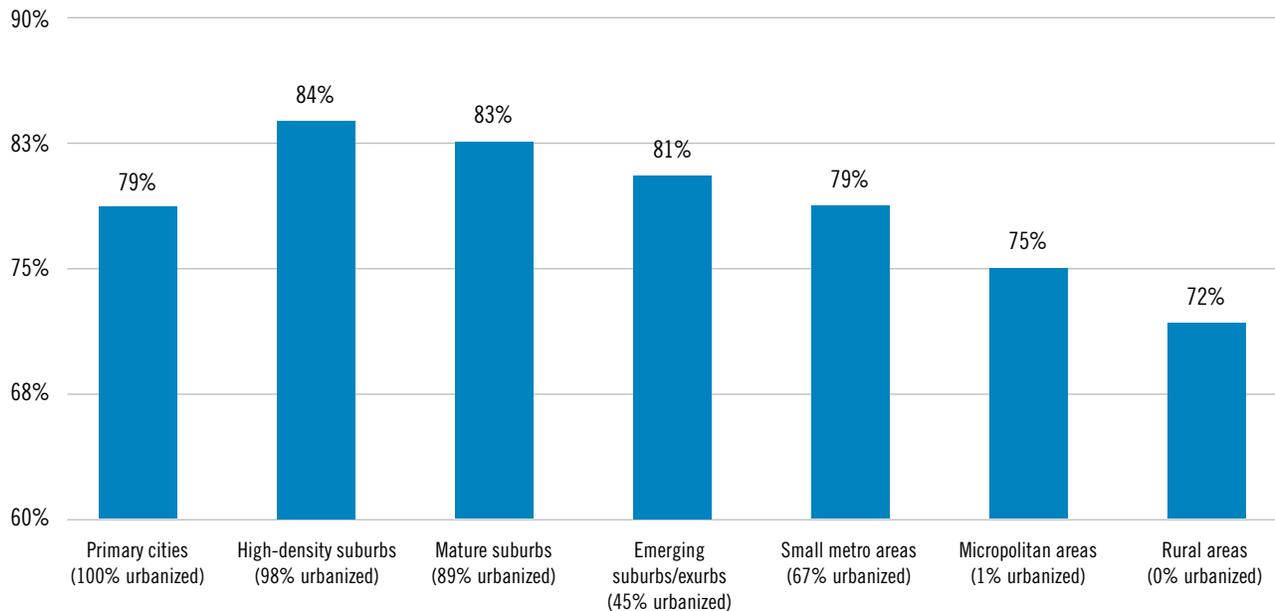
Higher education benefits job seekers and improves income, job security, and knowledge transfer. It also encourages civic and community engagement that is as essential in rural areas as it is everywhere. We hope that this paper will serve as a foundation for further discussions and greater inquiry into the attainment disparities affecting men in the rural United States and what can be done to address this challenge.

THE ECONOMIC STATE OF RURAL AMERICA

There is considerable local variation, but in general, rural communities have not fully regained the jobs that were lost during the Great Recession. An analysis by the U.S. Department of Agriculture reveals that, as of mid-2016, the number of employed individuals in rural areas was still 3 percent below its pre-recession peak. In contrast, during the same time, employment in metropolitan areas had exceeded its pre-recession peak by almost 5 percent. The same analysis concludes that about half of the rural/non-rural employment gap between 2010 and 2013 was because urban population growth outpaced near-zero growth in rural communities.

This gap is further illustrated by the below graph of Census Bureau data analyzed by researchers at Brookings Institution. According to this analysis, prime-aged men (25 to 54 years old) in rural areas are less likely to be employed than their counterparts in more urban areas. From 2010 to 2014, the employment rate for prime-aged men in rural communities was 72 percent compared with a 79 percent male employment rate in small metro areas, and 84 percent in high-density suburbs.²

EMPLOYMENT OF MEN AGED 25 TO 54 BY AREA TYPE, 2010-2014



Source: Berube, A. (2016). America's male employment crisis is both urban and rural. Washington, DC. Brookings Institution.

In addition, employers created more jobs in areas with younger and more educated workforces, further disadvantaging rural areas.³ Rural communities often find themselves in this difficult predicament: losing their younger, educated workers to areas with greater opportunity, deepening the challenge to attract employers because of that exodus. Several of the industries that have typically employed high concentrations of men in rural areas have experienced substantial job losses, including farming, construction and manufacturing. Other fields that offer primarily blue-collar jobs for men have grown, including forestry and fishing, mining, warehousing and transportation; however, these industries are comparatively small, together accounting for fewer than 10 percent of rural jobs. As in the rest of the country, healthcare is a growing industry. In 1960, jobs in healthcare totaled only 3.5 percent of all rural jobs compared to 10.3 percent in 2015.⁴

A challenge for many rural men is that jobs in growing fields often require at least some postsecondary education. For example, many manufacturers have incorporated new technologies that now require workers to have at least a postsecondary industry credential or associate degree; however only 44 percent of the workforce is adequately training, according to researchers from the National Skills Coalition.⁵ In North Carolina, for example, 10,000 applicants applied for 800 manufacturing positions with Siemens Energy several years ago. Siemens found that few applicants had the requisite skillset, and only 15 percent of the applicants passed a basic reading, writing, and math screening.⁶ Siemens' requirement that employees meet basic educational requirements indicates that such employers value both technical skills and basic general education, pointing to the importance of education beyond skills training for employability in many blue-collar environments.

RURAL DEMOGRAPHICS AND DIVERSITY

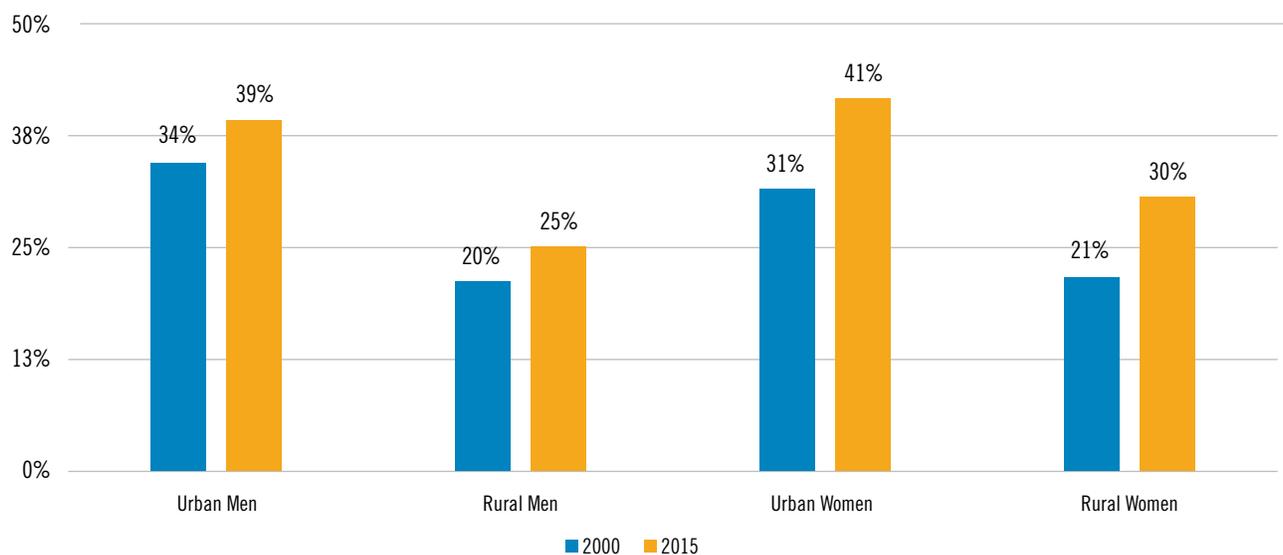
It is important to note that while rural residents are primarily white, in 2016, about 20 percent of residents of rural areas were people of color. Further, the poverty rates for African Americans (33 percent), American Indians (32 percent), and Hispanics (26 percent) living in rural areas significantly exceed those of white rural residents (15 percent).⁷ While the economic and educational issues described in this paper affect both white and non-white men, men of color are disproportionately affected.

Rural veterans are another group to consider. Approximately 44 percent of military personnel come from rural areas and veterans, most of whom are men, account for approximately 10 percent of rural communities.⁸ The presence of veterans also factor into the economic needs of rural communities. Because veterans are more likely to be high-skilled, they play an important role in businesses deciding to locate in rural areas. Rural veterans are more likely than rural adults as a whole to have completed at least some college or an associate degree. Likely as a result of more work experience and higher educational attainment, the median income of rural veterans was \$29,000 compared to \$19,800 for nonveteran rural adults.⁹

EDUCATIONAL PARTICIPATION AND ATTAINMENT OF RURAL MEN

Both men and women living in rural communities are less likely to have completed college compared to people living in urban and suburban areas; however, rural men lag the furthest behind. In 2015, 25 percent of men aged 25 or older living in rural areas had earned an associate degree or higher; compared to 30 percent of rural women, 39 percent of urban men, and 42 percent of urban women. Further, the postsecondary education attainment gap between rural men and women has grown from only 1 percent point in 2000 to 5 percentage points in 2015.¹⁰

PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS WITH AN ASSOCIATE DEGREE OR HIGHER BY GENDER AND AREA, 2000 AND 2015



Source: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2017). Rural education at a glance, 2017 edition. Washington, DC.



Many rural men are equipped to benefit from higher education. In 2016, 38 percent of rural men had completed high school but not attended college, and another 21 percent had attended college but had not completed a degree.¹¹ Helping this sizable pool of men gain the skills necessary to thrive in higher-wage, high-growth fields such as healthcare and advanced manufacturing is critical to the future of rural communities.

Men who have not had positive experiences in school or who simply prefer to do more active work may resist the notion of re-entering the classroom. Community colleges offer many programs that incorporate work-based learning and must convince prospective male students that the time they do spend in a classroom will be focused on learning that is highly relevant to their career goals.

Finally, some men struggle to seek help when they need it or to form a peer network that can support them during the inevitable challenges that arise for all students. To help male students succeed, community colleges and community-based organizations such as non-profits, unions, employers, and religious communities can create mentoring and peer support programs so male students have people to turn to with whom they feel comfortable and that can offer them the help and support they need.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES AS A RESOURCE FOR RURAL MALES

Community colleges are the primary source of postsecondary education in rural communities. Of the 381 rural institutions identified by the U.S. Department of Education, 218 are public community and technical colleges. These institutions enroll 78 percent of the 1.1 million undergraduates attending rural postsecondary institutions.¹² Consistent with the educational attainment data already cited, men are in the minority at rural community colleges, representing 44 percent of undergraduate enrollment nationally. However, at many institutions the gap between male and female enrollment is much higher.

In many rural areas, a community college is the only nearby postsecondary institution. As low-cost, open-access institutions, rural community colleges play a central role in providing access to education and training that is directly tied to the local labor market. Students can complete the courses necessary to transfer to a four-year institution or can take advantage of programs that will prepare them for local jobs requiring an associate degree or a certificate. In addition, community colleges offer career services that can lead to employment opportunities and can help male students form peer networks that provide valuable personal support and networking.

LOUISIANA COMMUNITY & TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM (LCTCS)

One of the primary challenges institutions face in serving rural males is getting them on campus. In rural communities, even outreach can be a challenge. The Louisiana Community and Technical College System's outreach starts with ensuring that rural campuses have the necessary funds to be able to first reach out to prospective students, then serve those who enroll. LCTCS's outreach works primarily through social media, faith-based communities, and local newspapers that still have strong readership.

Even if contact is made with prospective students, the challenge of encouraging them to enroll remains. LCTCS developed a partnership with Country Music Television to use recording artists to pitch the value of community college and to match a \$500 scholarship LCTCS provides to students who enroll after attending a recruitment event. If the prospective students find the pitch compelling, they have the benefit of enrolling with a guaranteed \$1,000 scholarship. The program is in its first year; however, already has over 700 prospects in 8 communities expected to take advantage of the program.

LCTCS also offers a program called Workready U to provide free online classes to help students prepare for their high school equivalency diploma. The classes can be taken at one of the campuses in the system, but the digital nature of the courses has the benefit of not requiring students to travel to a specific location. Scholarships are also available for students to pay for the cost of taking the high school equivalency exam in English or Spanish.

While guaranteed scholarship funds can create a strong push to get prospective students to enroll, LCTCS recognizes that students need a light at the end of the tunnel to see the value of a degree or credential and stay enrolled. Rural LCTCS campuses offer programs to prepare students for careers in high-demand fields including welding, industrial technology, and engineering technologies. LCTCS focuses on industries that have demand for jobs in-state--helping to combat the problem of students leaving the state after they complete their course of study.



HINDS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Hinds Community College is the largest community college in Mississippi with more than 12,000 students enrolled. The state capital of Jackson is located in its five-county district but about 75 percent of Hinds students live in rural areas. While unemployment is low in Mississippi, many jobs are low-skill. From 2012 to 2022, 57 percent of the jobs that need to be filled are middle-skill positions. These are the jobs Hinds is training students like Adam Kirkland to fill.¹³

Mississippi Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program (MI-BEST) is one the programs Hinds employs to support rural males towards postsecondary completion and a career. The program targets individuals who did not complete high school and puts them on a dual pathway to earn a General Education Diploma, or high school equivalency, and a workforce credential. Students are trained to be job-ready in six months. The program was initially funded in 2016 by a \$6 million grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and is also supported by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) grant funds. As of 2018, nearly 400 students have completed the MI-BEST program.

A second program, Project YOU, seeks to increase student retention rates. The program supports students seeking a traditional associate degree, but who are on academic suspension. Hinds found that students who are not doing well academically in a traditional liberal arts curriculum often succeed on a more career-oriented pathway. Students who participate in the program complete an intensive summer program to make up lost credits, then begin in the fall on a pathway towards a career-oriented credential. Sam Williams exemplifies the goal of the program.

Single Stop also helps connect students to financial resources at Hinds. The non-profit organization has been present at Hinds since 2014 and streamlines the process for students to access financial resources, for both tuition and living expenses. The program serves as a safety net to keep students in college when they experience financial hardship. Students complete an electronic screening process to see if they qualify for a variety of state and federal services. Access to emergency funds, legal and financial counseling, free tax preparation and a community clothes closet also are available. About 800 students take advantage of Single Stop at Hinds each year.

Hinds also makes use of the apprenticeship model in training students for careers that are in demand in Mississippi. A partnership between Hinds and KLLM Transportation Services, the nation's largest refrigerated transportation service, provides students with an industry-paid scholarship for training that combines classroom instruction and on-site experience. Students can earn a commercial driver's license in 22 days and make over \$20 per hour in six months.

SAMUEL WILLIAMS

INDUSTRIAL MAINTENANCE TECHNOLOGY
CONTINENTAL TIRE INTERN, NEW HIRE

In summer 2016, Sam Williams had one last chance at Hinds Community College. Facing academic suspension, he said he made the decision to not become a statistic – another black male without a college degree. Instead, he opted to enroll in a one-week rigorous academic study program at Hinds called "Project YOU." The program focused on study skills and time management and directed students to career/technical programs aimed at filling the middle-skill job gap in Mississippi. He finished second in his class.

His next step was the Industrial Maintenance program on the Rankin Campus. He enrolled in fall 2016 and made the Dean's List. "I have been succeeding ever since," he said.

In summer 2017, he became one of four Hinds students selected for a nine-week paid internship at the Continental Tire plant in Mount Vernon, Ill. Based on his performance there, Continental Tire paid his fall 2017 tuition.

"This is a new chapter of my life," he said. Williams, 22, graduated in December and returned to Mount Vernon, where he began a full-time position on Jan. 2, 2018, earning \$26 per hour.

He, along with three other Hinds Interns, are among the first people hired for the company's new plant in Hinds County, which will open in 2019.

"This has been one of the best opportunities of my life and I am truly blessed to be a part of it," Williams said.



Mississippi values.
MISSISSIPPI'S COMMUNITY & JUNIOR COLLEGES





OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO COLLEGE ACCESS AND COMPLETION

Men stand to benefit from attending community college in numerous ways, but there are several barriers that hinder both men and women from enrolling in college that arise out of the rural environment itself, such as living a long distance from the nearest postsecondary institution, lack of reliable transportation, and unavailable or insufficient internet access.

A main concern is the impact of living in an education desert-- an area more than 25 miles away from a college or university or that has only one broad-access public institution within 25 miles. According to researchers from the Brookings Institution, an estimated 41 million adults live in an education desert.¹⁴ Of those, more than 75 percent live in rural communities, highlighting the need for access to affordable, high-quality online education. Additionally, students who live in education deserts are nearly 20 percent less likely to complete a degree than students with easier access to postsecondary education.¹⁵ One strategy community colleges employ to address this problem is the use of remote classrooms. Many community colleges establish remote classrooms in easily accessible locations such as local high schools or businesses.

Online courses provide another option for students to attend college without having to travel. With the potential for flexible scheduling, online courses also can help students balance attending college with other responsibilities, such as work or caregiving. However, community colleges should not view online courses as a cure-all to the challenges of living in an education desert. Many students in rural areas do not have the high-speed internet access needed to complete coursework remotely. The use of online courses also raises concerns about maintaining a quality educational experience and providing sufficient interaction with course instructors and other college personnel.¹⁶

In addition to physical barriers, many social issues create barriers to rural men's postsecondary attainment. Male students may feel compelled to play a "breadwinner" role in their families¹⁷ and may opt out of attending college because it will delay or reduce earnings in the near-term. To counter this tendency, colleges should help men see education as a wise long-term investment, demonstrate a clear relationship to the labor market and, wherever possible, create efficiencies that allow students to move rapidly toward completing a credential. Community colleges also can help lessen the financial trade-offs for men to attend colleges, such as with scholarships and other financial aid—a strategy used by both Hinds Community College and the LCTCS and described in the previous institutional profiles.

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY COLLEGES DOING?

Rural community colleges have embraced several strategies to encourage men to take advantage of the many opportunities that their institutions offer and to help them succeed once enrolled. These strategies include:

- **Bringing the college closer to students' home and work.** Providing remote classrooms or online course options helps students who have transportation barriers, or work and family responsibilities that may prevent them from traveling to a main campus. An important component of this is ensuring that students have access to high-speed internet, either in their home or at a satellite campus.
- **Conducting effective outreach.** The first step to getting a student to enroll is crafting an effective outreach effort. Institutions are using a variety of methods from reaching out with social and local media, to getting in touch with students in their faith-based communities.
- **Ensuring that students have access to all available resources.** Programs like Single Stop work with institutions and students to connect students to resources and help them maximize their financial aid awards.
- **Partnering with high schools to encourage students to go to college,** such as with dual enrollment programs. The importance of postsecondary education in men's lives can be introduced at a younger age, certainly before they finish high school, so that they might consider college as a route to achieving their personal and career goals.
- **Increasing internship and apprenticeship opportunities to help students develop career-focused skills.** Typical rural industries, such as farming and manufacturing, are rapidly changing with new technologies. For example, employees in these industries must rely heavily on math and problem-solving skills to operate new equipment. As industries shift, rural men must be equipped with modern skills and gain experience in growing industries, such as healthcare, to have better economic opportunities.
- **Create programs that are targeted to local needs.** A good way to show students that their course of study will lead to employment is to create programs that partner with local industries. This will also increase the likelihood that students who complete their program will stay in state after graduation.



CONCLUSION

Rural community colleges are taking a number of steps to help men overcome logistical, academic and personal barriers so that they can take advantage of the opportunities that these colleges offer, secure their own economic futures, and contribute to the revitalization of their communities. By first understanding their students and the barriers that they face, colleges can create partnerships with the local community to improve students' outcomes and supply well-qualified employees to the local economy.

Rural communities continue to struggle to recover from the Great Recession—and men are disproportionately affected. As the primary postsecondary institutions in rural America, community colleges are an essential source for affordable, high-quality educational programs that teach the knowledge and skills local employers seek. First, community colleges need to craft an outreach strategy that presents prospective students with the value of a degree or credential and encourages them to enroll. Second, community colleges need to do as much as they can to ensure that students maximize their financial aid and resources. Third, community colleges should continue to work with students while they complete their course of study to make sure they are on a track that fits their interests and will lead to greater job opportunities.

The Louisiana Community and Technical College System and Hinds Community College both use a variety of tactics to help rural men secure their futures. Both have found small scholarships and career pathways and training to be effective. LCTCS uses strategic outreach to contact potential students and offers small scholarships to those who enroll after attending a recruitment event. Hinds uses multiple programs to ensure that students are on a track that best fits their interests and works with Single Stop to connect their students with resources. Both institutions use the apprenticeship model to help students secure jobs in in-demand fields. These colleges provide a valuable model that other community colleges can follow to help male students contribute to the revitalization of rural America.

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