



Rural Talent Development and Attraction Lab Project Overview

The Rural Talent Development and Attraction Lab (“Rural Talent Lab”) is a multi-year initiative led by the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) in partnership with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) and HCM Strategists (HCM) that aims to improve rural higher education opportunities. Funded by a \$7,245,600 grant from Ascendium Education Group, the Rural Talent Lab will support five states in developing a Statewide Plan for Rural Talent Development and Attraction that will initially include the implementation of at least four, middle-skill credential (i.e. sub-baccalaureate) pathways in each state that are accessible, transparent, and as low-cost as possible for rural learners.

These associate-degree and undergraduate-certificate programs will be directly connected to each state’s respective rural workforce needs, as informed by multiple data-collection efforts. In addition to analyzing demographic and economic data, the Rural Talent Lab will bring participating state teams on a community listening tour to visit rural communities in their respective states for conversations with a range of stakeholders representing municipal government, economic development organizations, employers, local school districts, regional healthcare systems, and more, to better understand community assets, wants, needs, and prior successes or failures in developing and attracting talent. Additionally, the project team will be administering public-opinion surveys to rural residents in each of the selected states in order to gather similar input from rural constituents beyond the listening tour stops. Equipped with robust data, state teams will work closely with an expert adviser and attend four in-person Academy sessions over the course of the project to develop their statewide plan and implement the four initial credential pathways. Technical assistance and travel funding will be available for the selected state teams to support additional needs related to their Rural Talent Lab participation.

Rural learners will be enrolled in the initial pathways beginning in Fall 2027, with subsequent cohorts to follow. The project team will evaluate the first cohort by using state administrative data and the results of a Pathway Participant Survey administered to learners in Spring 2028. The evaluation will be presented to state teams during the final in-person Academy session for the purposes of informing the maintenance and expansion of these pathways. State teams will be periodically surveyed to help the research team understand how their perceptions of rural talent-development needs evolve over the course of the project.

The Rural Talent Lab will also include strategic dissemination and engagement activities. While the project will be limited to five participating states, the project team will also be identifying states that demonstrate emerging potential for this type of work in the near future for the purposes of scheduling site visits to Rural Talent Lab states for co-learning opportunities and

readiness assessment. The project team will share highlights and outcomes with state and federal policymakers, as well as host a panel presentation and reception to engage with think-tanks, philanthropic organizations, institutional membership associations, and research firms to highlight how efforts like the Rural Talent Lab can be replicated in other states. The dissemination strategy will also include presentations at national professional and academic conferences, podcast episodes, a blog to share project insights and updates, research reports, and academic journal articles.

The Rural Talent Lab aims to serve as a new model for creating and expanding higher education opportunities in rural communities across the country, and one that allows each state to be responsive to the unique assets and needs of their respective rural populations. By directly engaging rural stakeholders in the process and building on-the-ground relationships, these opportunities will enable rural residents to live, learn, and work in the places they love for many years to come.