

Building Rural Higher Education Research with State Agencies

MDRC's National Rural Higher Education Research Center

August 2025

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National Rural Higher Education Research Center

Center Overview

- Five-year project funded by Institute of Education Sciences
- Mission: Assess strategies for improving rates of postsecondary enrollment and completion for students from rural communities across the United States
- Approach: Work closely with state agencies to answer local/regional questions about rural postsecondary education and workforce development



The Center has four research questions:



What is the current rural college-going and college completion landscape nationally, and how does it vary across regions and student demographics?



How can academic pathways between high school and college be strengthened for rural high school students?

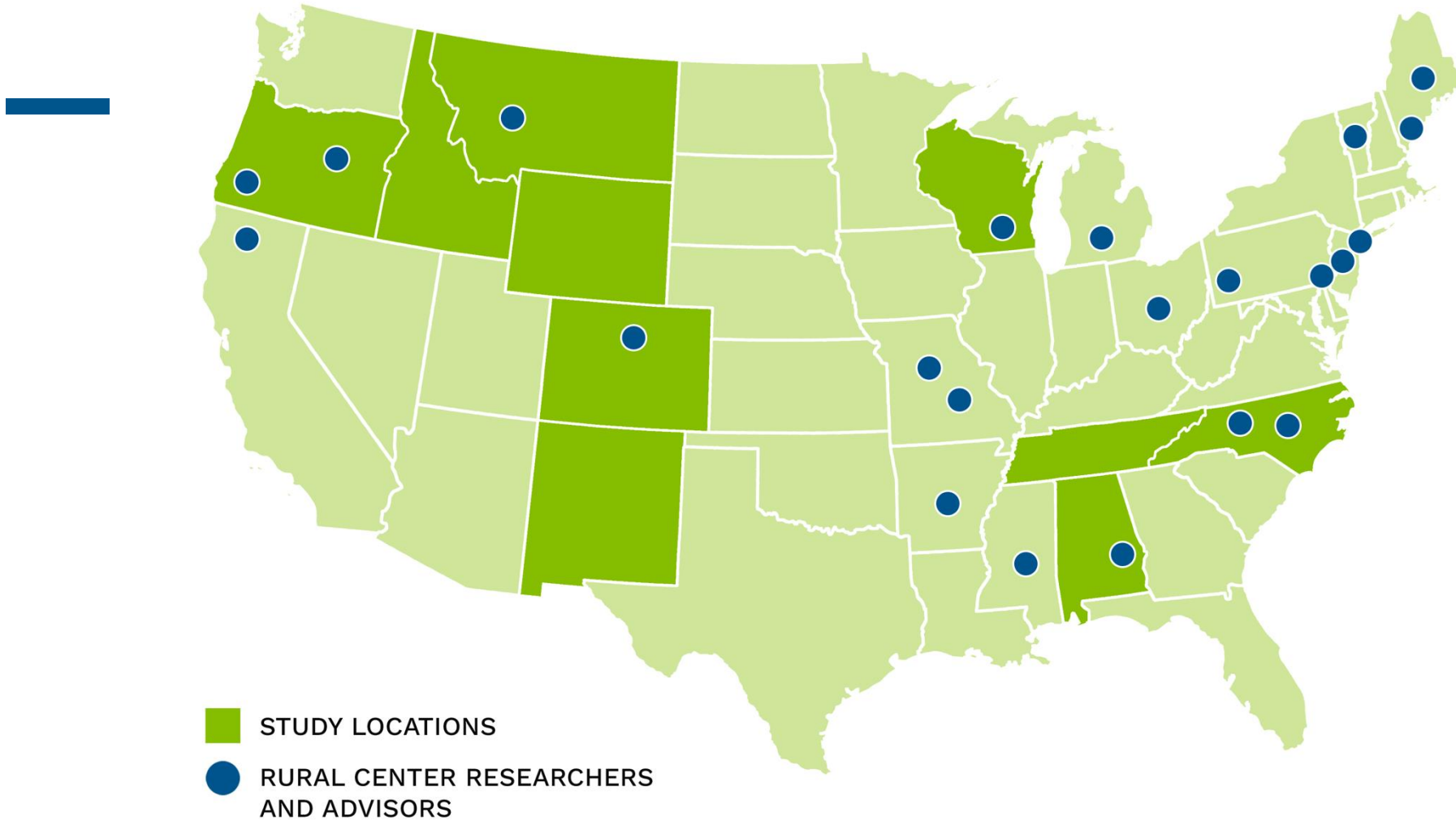


How do prospective college students in rural areas conceptualize their postsecondary options and make decisions about undertaking college or workforce training?



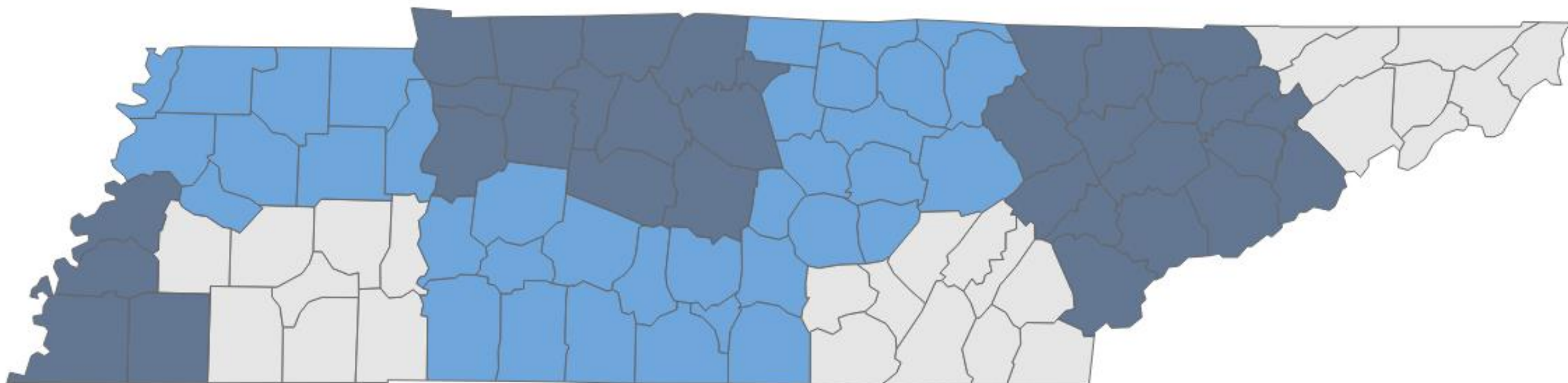
How can institutions and states improve college persistence and completion rates for rural students?

Where are we working?



Four States, Four Geographies

Tennessee Landscape



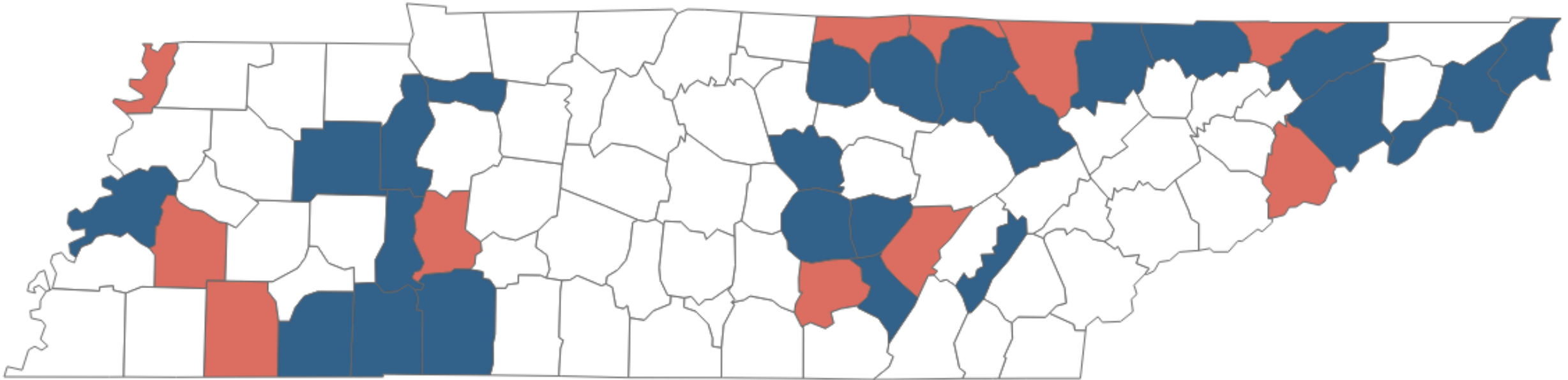
Dual Enrollment



Education and Workforce Alignment



Tennessee Landscape

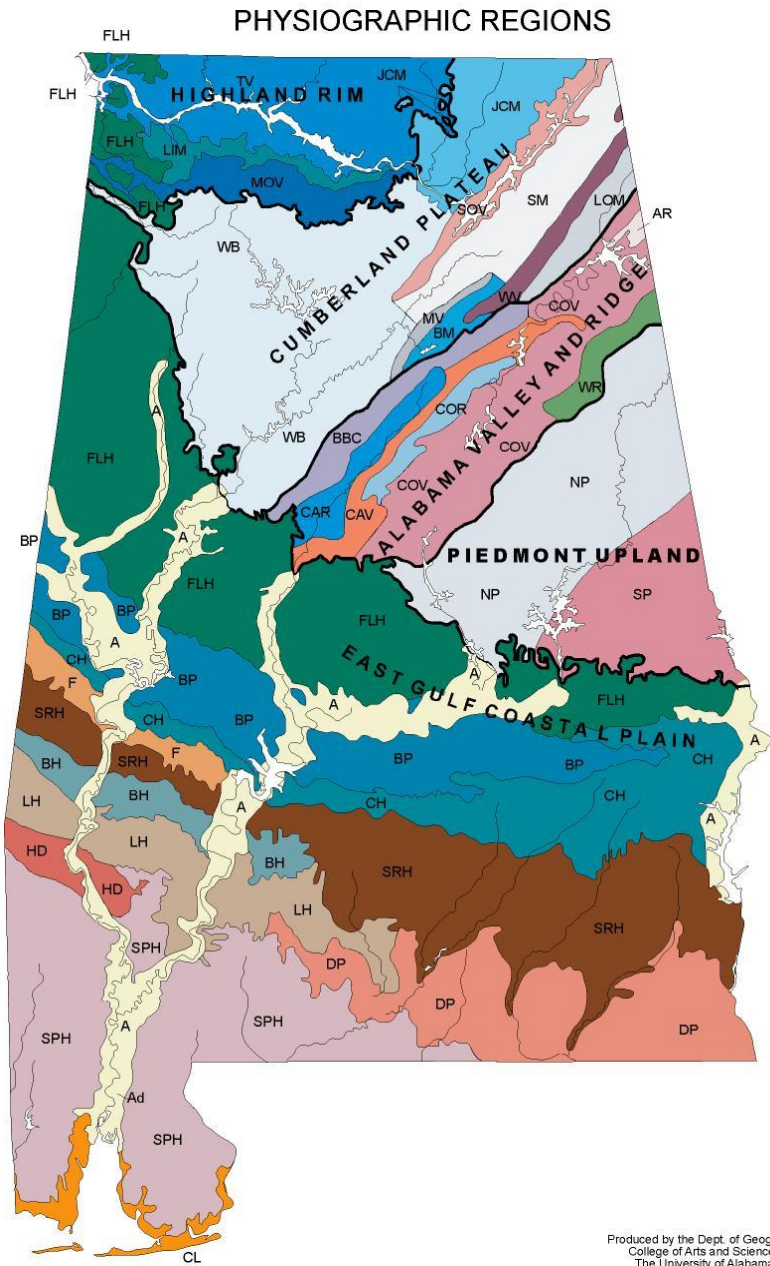


Dual Enrollment



Education and Workforce Alignment

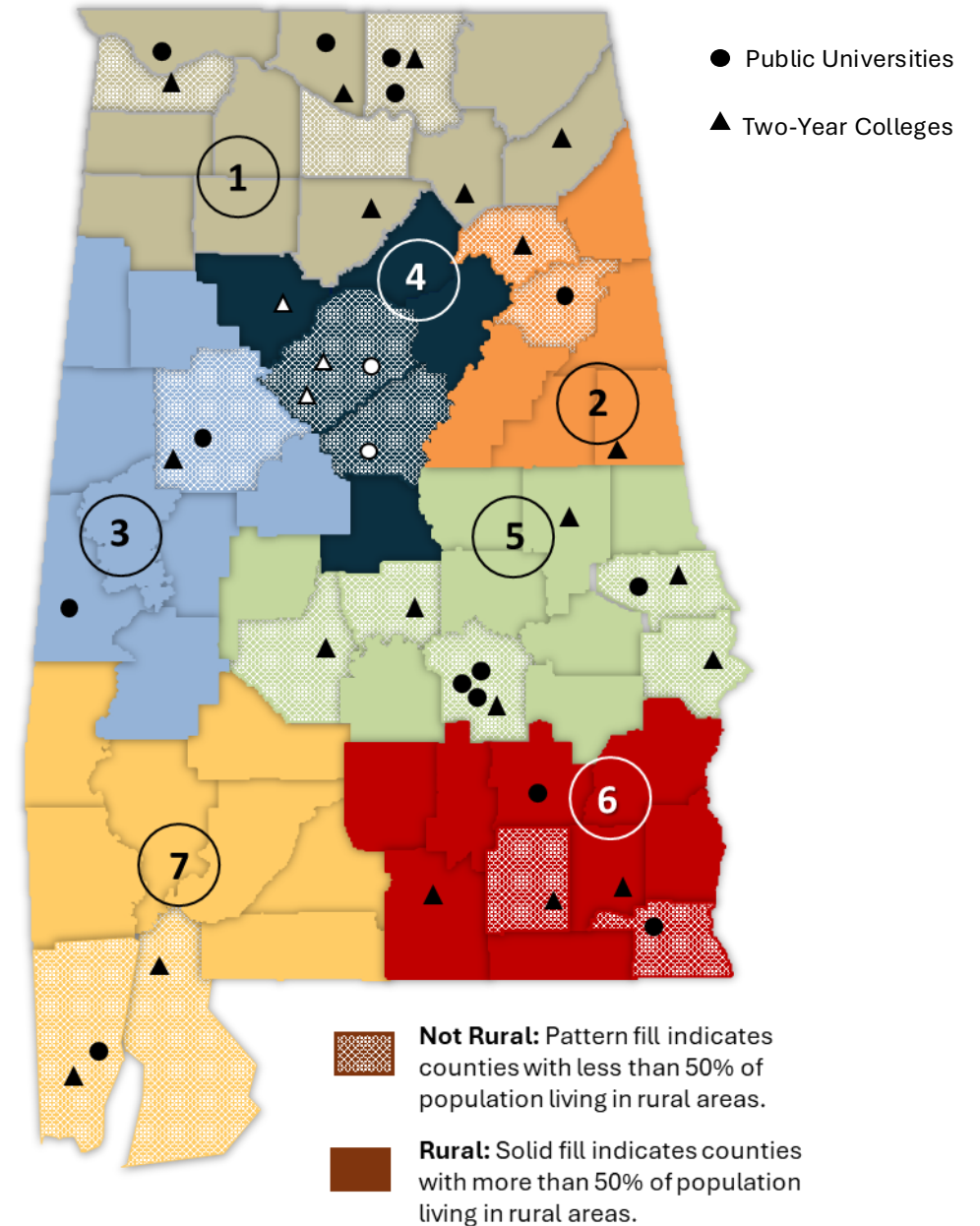




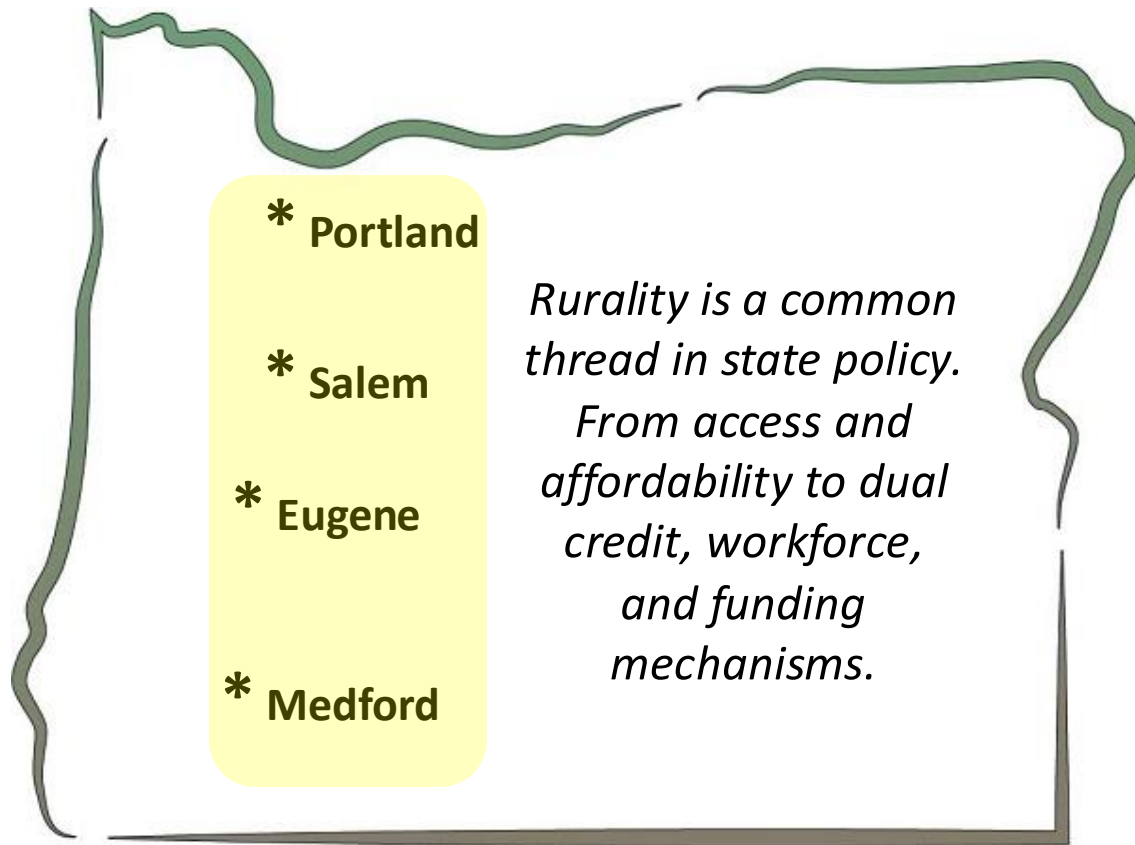
Produced by the Dept. of Geography
College of Arts and Sciences
The University of Alabama



Alabama's Seven Workforce Regions



Oregon Postsecondary Education



Decentralized governance – local governing boards + a coordinating commission that includes workforce. 25 public institutions, 9 workforce boards.

Rural/frontier areas – 80% of Oregonians live along IH-5. State population is 65% urban, 33% rural, and 2% frontier.

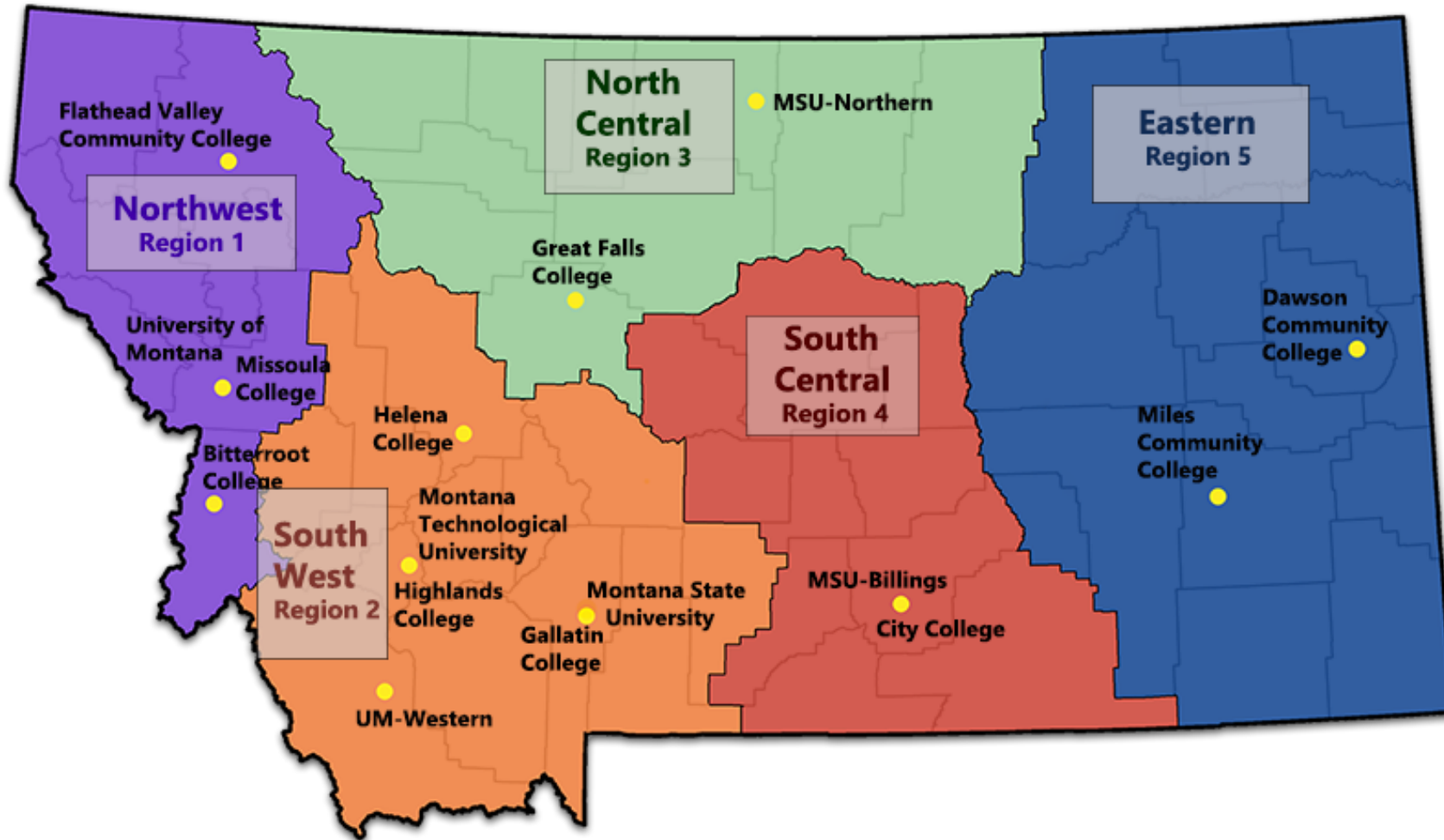
Achievement gaps – 65% of HS are rural enrolling 42% of students; 30% are students of color with 75% free/reduced lunch eligible; gaps in enrollment, persistence, and completion.

Source Notes: Population data from Oregon Office of Rural Health. Achievement gaps data from: *Supporting Rural Students in Oregon in High School and Beyond*. The Ford Family Foundation and Education Northwest. Feb 2021.



MONTANA

UNIVERSITY SYSTEM



- 16 institutions (R1s, special designation S&T, regional comprehensives, embedded and stand alone 2-years)
- ~42,000 students
- Board of Regents has sole constitutional authority to govern as one institution
- 96% of K-12 districts are rural designated
- 4th largest geography
- 61% of all businesses are small

Discussion



Participation

Join our listserv –
RuralHigherEd@mdrc.org



Feedback

Get in touch with any of us



Innovations

Share your innovations and work
with us to evaluate them!

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