



## **ARRC-Led Rural Talent Lab Launches Inaugural Cohort**

*Five States Commit to Building Career-Connected Credential Pathways in Rural America*

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**Boone, NC** - [The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges \(ARRC\)](#), in collaboration with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) and HCM Strategists, is launching the inaugural cohort of the Rural Talent Development and Attraction Lab (“Rural Talent Lab”) that will engage in middle-skill credential (i.e. associate’s degrees and sub-baccalaureate certifications) pathway development over the next four years.

As many Americans report losing confidence in the value of postsecondary education, the Rural Talent Lab is supporting five states in a process to rebuild and reassert the value of postsecondary education in rural communities by creating educational opportunities that are accessible, stackable, radically affordable, and targeted to local workforce needs. Better matching middle-skill preparation with good and growing middle-skill jobs is a critical strategy in nurturing vibrant and thriving rural communities.

“Colleges have been located in rural areas for decades, with the intention that they help train local residents and be partners in community growth, among other missions. Instead, in too many cases, colleges are seen as intimidating and out-of-touch. The Rural Talent Lab recognizes that learning institutions are not aloof, and are just as interested in the success of their environs as the people who live there and the businesses that surround them. Its goal is to build linkages that will benefit everyone,” noted Martin Van Der Werf, who is retired from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, where he studied job trends and the value of postsecondary education, and co-authored the 2024 report, *Small Towns, Big Opportunities: Many Workers in Rural Areas Have Good Jobs, but These Areas Need Greater Investment in Education, Training, and Career Counseling*.

The inaugural cohort of states—Kansas, Montana, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia—will emerge as leaders in rural talent development and attraction, creating middle-skill credential pathways that leverage the new Workforce Pell Grant, ensure quality outcomes, and address non-academic concerns that can hinder postsecondary educational pursuits in rural communities. The Rural Talent Lab approach centers rural perspectives and engages directly with rural residents and community leaders in the development of these credential pathways to ensure that they are sustainable and respond to the needs of local learners and employers.

States will receive a range of supports through the Rural Talent Lab, including travel and technical-assistance funding, intensive pathway and policy advising, community listening tours, rural public-opinion polling, in-person professional development events, and a suite of research activities that will inform the development and evaluation of the pathways implemented in this effort. In order to understand the effects of a rural-centric approach across a variety of settings, the Rural Talent Lab selected five states that varied in terms of geography, politics, rural demographics, state team structure, and workforce needs. Additionally, each state brings unique strengths that support the project's goals, including relationships with Tribal Colleges and communities, strong gubernatorial support, partnerships spanning multiple agencies and campuses, and the desire to engage some of the hardest-to-reach communities.

"We are grateful to all of the states who hosted us for site visits this summer," said Andrew Koricich, the Rural Talent Lab's principal investigator and ARRC's executive director, "and it was inspiring to see each one demonstrate strong and sincere commitments to supporting their rural communities and learners. We're excited to engage with these five state teams and their rural communities to create relevant, low-cost pathways that lead to jobs with family-sustaining wages. Ultimately, these states are committing to creating strong rural communities and lasting opportunities for rural folks to live, learn, and work in the places they love." Dr. Koricich, a native of rural Pennsylvania and a national expert in rural higher education, provided a keynote address on the topic to over 500 leaders and policy researchers and advocates at this week's SHEEO Higher Education Policy Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Adam Ray, Deputy Director of the Rural Talent Lab, added, "We chose to drive to site visits as a way to begin appreciating the unique assets and challenges of rural communities in each state. We get a better understanding of rural places by driving through them, rather than flying over them, and it has already proven to be an important aspect of our relationship-building in these states."

Beyond the five selected states, the Rural Talent Lab is also launching a "readiness accelerator track" for 11 additional states to provide co-learning opportunities, exposure to project activities and approaches, and expert insight. The goals of this second track are to help other states in their rural talent-development efforts and increase preparedness for future cohorts of the Rural Talent Lab. This is just one strand in the project's public-engagement strategy to encourage the proliferation of this type of model and investment to other states across the country.

"We are excited to be working with ARRC to bring new opportunities to these states. Many state higher education leaders are exploring ways to increase attainment and economic mobility in their rural communities, and the Rural Talent Lab will allow five states to make important strides toward these goals. Additionally, there will be lessons learned that can benefit many states, and we look forward to sharing those as part of a nationwide engagement strategy," said Rob Anderson, President of SHEEO, the national organization representing the leaders of state higher education systems and agencies and a key partner in this work.

Along with Koricich and Ray, the ARRC team includes co-directors Alisa Hicklin Fryar (University of Oklahoma) and Vanessa Sansone (University of Texas at San Antonio), as well as research fellows

Ty McNamee (University of Kentucky) and Allyson Shortle (University of Oklahoma). In addition to SHEEO, ARRC is proud to have the support of HCM Strategists, the nation's leading state-focused postsecondary education and career competitive learning consulting organization. HCM has partnered with leaders in 50 states to adopt statewide attainment goals, financing policies aligned to a state's talent needs, and learner-centered postsecondary pathways.

Project updates will be available at ARRC's website ([regionalcolleges.org](http://regionalcolleges.org)), LinkedIn page (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/arrcresearch>), and Bluesky accounts (@arrc.bsky.social and @ruraltalentlabs.bsky.social). Media inquiries can be directed to Adam Ray ([rayca@appstate.edu](mailto:rayca@appstate.edu)).

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*The Rural Talent Development and Attraction Lab is a project led by the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges, in collaboration with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association and HCM Strategists, and funded by a four-year, \$7,245,600 grant from Ascendium Education Group. It aims to support five states in the creation of a Statewide Plan for Rural Talent Development and Attraction that includes the development of at least four middle-skill credential pathways that meet the needs of rural communities in each state. Through a combination of community listening tours, public-opinion polling, in-person learning academies, and expert advising, state teams will develop pathways that are transparent, accessible, connected to local workforce needs, and as close-to-free as possible for rural learners. The project will engage in a range of evaluative activities to inform states' ongoing pathway development, while ultimately establishing a new model for rural talent development and attraction.*

*The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges is a research collaborative and resource hub with the mission of increasing appreciation for and understanding of regional colleges and their contributions to opportunity and community wellbeing. As a center based at Appalachian State University, the multi-year initiative aims to build research infrastructure, produce data-driven analysis, and disseminate accessible knowledge for a range of audiences.*

*Ascendium Education Group® is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization driven by the belief that learning after high school gives people the power to build better futures. Our national philanthropy focuses on increasing opportunities for learners from low-income backgrounds to achieve upward mobility through postsecondary education and workforce training. We partner with organizations whose objectives align with our core strategies to expand opportunity, support learner success, and connect and align systems. Our grantees include postsecondary education and workforce training providers, intermediaries, researchers, and media organizations from across the U.S. To learn more, visit [ascendiumphilanthropy.org](http://ascendiumphilanthropy.org).*