

Informing Policy Through Place:

Centering Rural Voices in the
Definition, Design, and Delivery
of Higher Education

2025 SHEEO Annual Meeting

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About ARRC

Established in 2020 and housed at Appalachian State University since 2021, the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC, “arc”) is a multi-university research collaborative and resource hub with the mission of increasing appreciation for and understanding of regional colleges and their contributions to educational opportunity and community wellbeing.



A Center at Appalachian State University

“Rural” by Any
Other Name



What IS “rural” anyway?

- *That depends who you ask.*
- Areas of <2,000 housing units or <5,000 people (urban/rural, Census)
- Counties with rural towns of <5,000 & urban areas <50,000 not part of larger metro area (metro/non-metro, USDA ERS)
- NCES (urban, suburban, town, rural):

Rural

41	Fringe	Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster.
42	Distant	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.
43	Remote	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.

SOURCE: NCES locale classifications and Criteria. Retrieved February 25, 2022, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/LOCALE_CLASSIFICATIONS.pdf

What IS “rural” anyway?

- *That depends who you ask.*
- Commuting zones
- Agency-specific definitions
- State-specific definitions (which some federal agencies use)
- Less-scientific, colloquial definitions

What IS “rural” anyway?

But what if you ask rural folks?

Considering Rural Identity

- What if “rural” is as much an identity as it is a place?

Example from Citizen Attitudes on Postsecondary Education (CAPE) Project

- “Do you live in a rural community and/or identify as a person from a rural background?”
 - I live in a rural place, and I identify as having a rural background.
 - I live in a rural place, but I do not identify as having a rural background.
 - I do not live in a rural place, but I identify as having a rural background.
 - I do not live in a rural place, and I do not identify as having a rural background.





When poll is active respond at

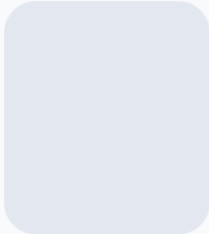
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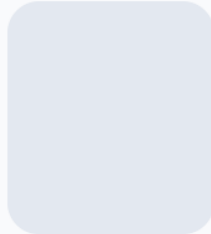
What percentage of US residents lives or have lived in a rural place?

0%



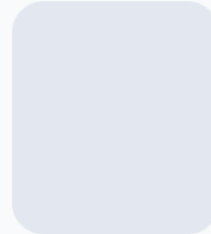
0%-20%

0%



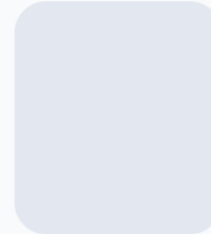
21%-40%

0%



41%-60%

0%



61%-80%

0%



81%-100%



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Do you live in a rural community and/or identify as a person from a rural background?

0

I live in a rural community, and I identify as having a ru...

0%

I live in a rural community, but I do not identify as havin...

0%

I do not live in a rural community, but I identify as havin...

0%

I do not live in a rural community, and I do not identify...

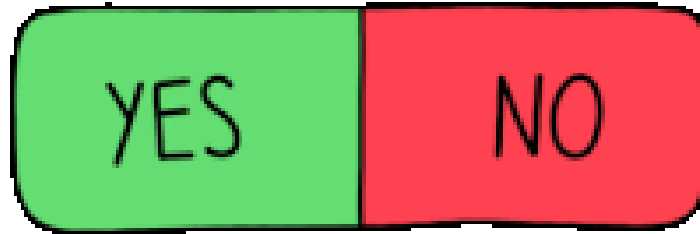
0%

Considering Rural Identity

Do you live in a rural community and/or identify as a person from a rural background?



So, does the definition of “rural” matter?



So, does the definition of “rural” matter?

- A little, but not much.
- Definitions should be defensible, but accept that they will always be imperfect.
 - Policy isn't neurosurgery; it's a blunt instrument.
 - Better to adopt an imperfect definition than to burn cycles adjudicating rural definitions.

Centering Rurality
in Institutional
Definitions



Rural-Serving Institutions

- Two fundamental questions:
 - What is *rural*?
 - What is *serving*?
- Plus, one more:
 - How can these be measured consistently across thousands of institutions?

ARRC's Definition of RSIs

- Our Key Considerations:
 - Accommodating the lack of rural student % in federal data
 - Balancing institutional and student rurality
 - Distinguishing between rural-located and rural-serving
 - Looking beyond geography and population to what institutions do
 - Representing rurality as qualitatively as possible with quantitative data
 - Understanding that no one definition of “rural” is sufficient

List of RSI Metric Variables & Data Sources

VARIABLE	VALUES	SOURCE
Percent of institution's home county population classified as rural	0-100%	United States Census Bureau (2010)
Average percent of adjacent counties' population classified as rural	0-100%	United States Census Bureau (2010)
Population size of institution's home county	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Metro area, 1,000,000+ 2. Metro area, 250,000-1,000,000 3. Metro area, Less than 250,000 4. Urban population, 20,000+ 5. Urban population, 2,500-19,999 6. Rural population, less than 2,500 	USDA-ERS (2013/2020)
Institution's home county adjacency to a metro area	Yes / No	USDA-ERS (2013/2020)
Percent of institution's total awards conferred in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Parks & Recreation	0-100%	IPEDS (2020)

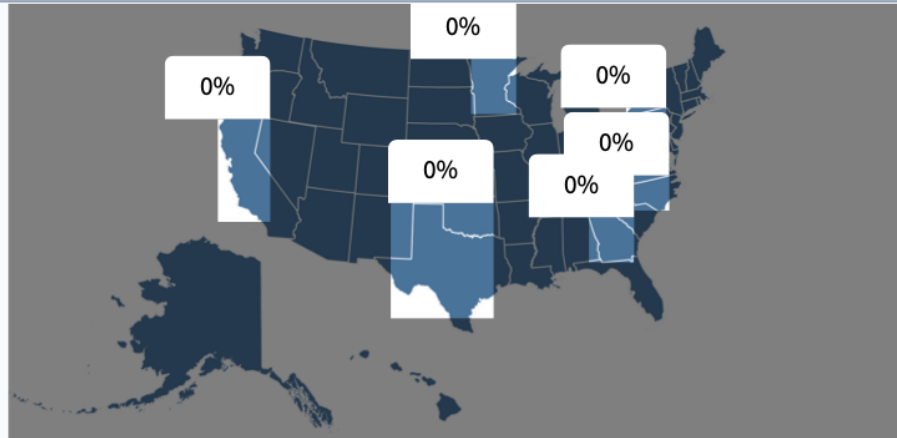
Koricich et al. (2022b)



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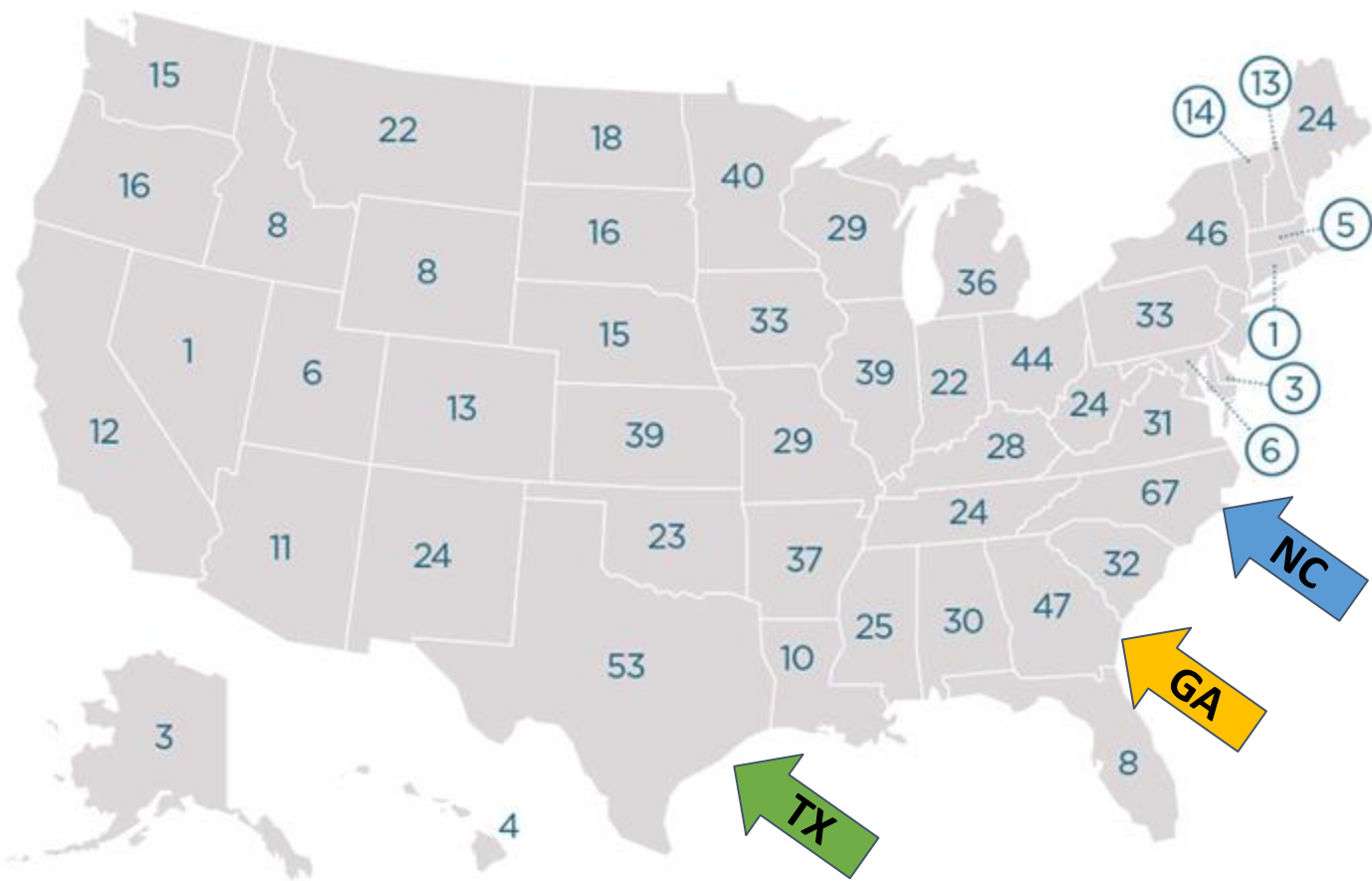


Which state has the most RSIs?



States with the Most RSIs

RSI Counts by State



RSI Counts by Institutional Sector

SECTOR	RSIs (%)	HIGH RSIs (%)
2-year, public	444 / 841 (52.8%)	238 / 841 (28.3%)
2-year, private	8 / 22 (36.4%)	4 / 22 (18.2%)
4-year, public	325 / 711 (45.7%)	129 / 711 (18.1%)
4-year, private	310 / 951 (32.6%)	134 / 951 (14.1%)
Total	1,087 / 2,525 (43.0%)	504 / 2,525 (20.0%)

Scan the QR code to learn more about our project identifying rural-serving institutions across the country.



What We Know About RSIs

RSI Counts by Institutional Designation

DESIGNATION	RSIs (%)	HIGH RSIs (%)
Land-grant institution	70 / 113 (61.9%)	33 / 113 (29.2%)
Historically Black Colleges & Universities	30 / 93 (32.3%)	11 / 93 (11.8%)
Tribal Colleges & Universities	32 / 34 (94.1%)	26 / 34 (76.5%)
High Native-enrolling (non-TCU)	28 / 30 (93.3%)	18 / 30 (60.0%)
High Hispanic-enrolling	83 / 466 (17.8%)	41 / 466 (8.8%)
High Black-enrolling (non-HBCU)	32 / 87 (36.8%)	22 / 87 (25.3%)
High Asian / Pacific Islander-enrolling	24 / 306 (7.8%)	3 / 306 (1.0%)

Koricich et al. (2022b)

RSI Counts by USDA County Traits

USDA COUNTY TRAITS	RSIs (%)	HIGH RSIs (%)
Low education	95 / 245 (38.8%)	64 / 245 (26.1%)
Low employment	260 / 314 (82.8%)	169 / 314 (53.8%)
Population loss	144 / 230 (62.6%)	82 / 161 (50.9%)
Persistent poverty	109 / 161 (67.7%)	81 / 504 (16.1%)
Persistent child-poverty	223 / 422 (52.8%)	155 / 422 (36.7%)
Retirement destination	113 / 244 (46.3%)	45 / 244 (18.4%)

- RSIs span a wide range of special missions and populations, often contrary to popular narratives about rural people and places. (Koricich et al., 2022a; Koricich et al. 2022b)

What We Know About RSIs

- Sustaining local economies and fueling community vitality
 - Culture/arts programming, community-support services, small business incubation, etc.
 - Providing educated workers for high-demand industries, including local healthcare and school systems.
 - Supplying volunteers for community organizations.
- Partners in building public health infrastructure, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (McClure et al., 2021).

What We Know About RSIs

- Rural institutions employ an outsized share of their region's workforce, and the economic effect cascades into secondary and tertiary employment (McClure et al., 2021; Orphan & McClure, 2019).
- RPU's serving rural populations are often asked to do the same, or more, with less than their non-rural peers (Koricich et al., 2020)
 - RSIs in Western NC were indispensable actors in the immediate response and ongoing recovery from Hurricane Helene.

Creating A Typology of RSIs

- As a sector, RSIs are more diverse than just considering sector or special mission. How do we make sense of that?
- Latent class analysis of RSIs using a variety of student-body, institutional, and locale characteristics. Preliminary results indicate 5 classes.
 - Standout classes include:
 - Tribal Colleges & Universities
 - Institutions of Non-Traditional Opportunity

What Keeps Me Up at Night:

What Remains of St. Andrews

Following the sudden closure of St. Andrews University, Laurinburg grapples with the fallout and the now-empty campus property at the heart of the community.

Penn State board backs plan to close 7 campuses, saying low enrollment, financials leave no other choice

Owing \$26 million to the USDA, Iowa Wesleyan University announces closure

Kansas Board of Regents evaluating action plans for underperforming university programs

October 12, 2023

Emporia State Cut Tenured Faculty. Enrollment Plunged.

Richland campus to close, two others end in-person instruction, under directive from President Rothman

Tuesday, October 17, 2023

PASSHE Approves Plan To Merge Six State Universities Into Two

December 13, 2024

The Year in Closures and Mergers

Centering Rural
in Designing &
Delivering
Postsecondary
Opportunities



Rural Attitudes Are Complex

- Early results from the CAPE project's pilot study reveal some interesting findings on how rural identity shapes attitudes about postsecondary education.
 - One of the primary outcomes of this work is the development of a Higher Education Economic Value Skepticism Index that is proving to be a strong predictor of attitudes about college (often more so than party-affiliation).
- *For some of our components, it doesn't make a difference.*
 - A degree isn't worth as much as it used to be.
 - People should explore other options.
- *Sometimes, it's about where you live.*
 - Loan debt leaves most worse off.
 - Most should go straight to work.
- *For others, any rural experience makes a difference.*
 - Most would be better off learning a trade.
 - College pressures people to change their beliefs.

Rural voices matter!

- All too often, policies or programs are implemented for rural stakeholders, rather than with rural stakeholders.
 - “Stakeholders” doesn’t just include people with titles. It includes everyday folks.
- Rural residents are experts in their communities’ needs, history, politics, and more, and that expertise must be tapped when serving these places.
- When rural voices are left out of planning and development discussions, solutions may not “fit” or may otherwise be unsustainable or unused.
 - Rural attitudes are often reduced to generalities or stereotypes, ignoring the nuance and variation that exists.



SHEEO



About the Rural Talent Development & Attraction Lab

The Rural Talent Development and Attraction Lab (“Rural Talent Lab”) is a collaboration between the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC), the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), and HCM Strategists to address middle-skill workforce needs in rural communities. Funded by a \$7.2 million grant from Ascendium Education Group, the Rural Talent Lab will establish middle-skill credential pathways uniquely tailored to the needs of rural residents in five selected states, with the goal of creating pathways that are accessible, transparent, connected to local jobs with family-sustaining wages, and as close-to-free as possible.

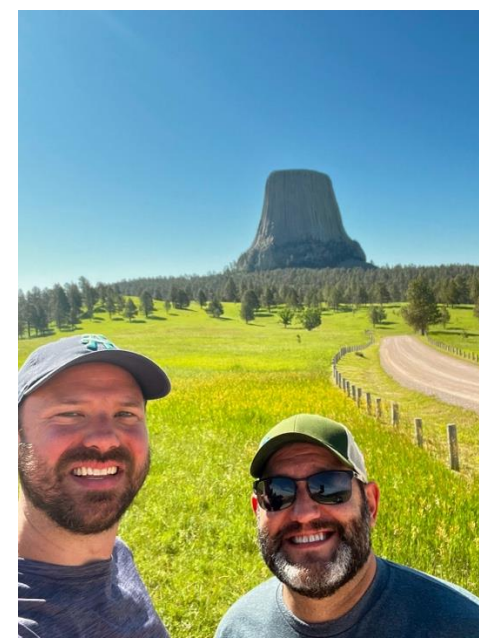
Guiding Principles

- Low-income students and low-resource, rural communities deserve investment to enhance their futures, as well as the future of their state as a whole.
- Regionality and place-based focus are key features of any strategy to support rural learners and communities, even for activities that seek to support statewide economic goals.
- Rural people, communities, and postsecondary institutions have unique assets and knowledge that can be leveraged for their own self-determination and to support long-term regional and statewide economic resilience.
- Rural people should be able to live, learn, work, and earn a family wage in the rural places they love.
- This work is not about moving toward the merger, consolidation, or closure of rural colleges, but rather, realistic assessments of fiscal challenges and the institutional adaptations required.
- Technology will have an important role in enhancing rural postsecondary opportunities and outcomes, but this does not reduce the need for physical campuses in rural places.

PROJECT FOUNDATIONS

Hitting the Road: Summer 2025 State Site Visits

- We visited six states across the country as part of our selection process. And we drove the entire way – nearly 8,000 miles in June.
- We get a much better understanding of rural places, and their diversity, by driving through them than flying over them.
 - But it also supports relationship-building on-the-ground
- **THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A “FLYOVER STATE.”**
 - *Also, everywhere is somewhere.*



RESEARCH DESIGN

Centering Rural Voices: Community Listening Tours

- A community listening tour will be planned in each state that will include 3-4 day-long stops in rural parts of the state.
- The project team travels together by bus to experience these rural places firsthand, and to be able to reflect together on what we're learning at each stop.
- Town hall settings with various community and industry leaders
- On-the-streets to talk to everyday residents of the communities
- Staying in rural hotels, eating at and ordering catering from rural restaurants, and supporting rural businesses.



Centering Rural Voices: Rural Public-Opinion Surveys

- Balancing the need to hear from all rural voices in the state vs. Practical limitations of community listening tours
- Using lessons learned from CAPE pilot
- Informing pathway development and structured supports
- Implications for messaging and communications
- Better understanding rural attitudes and policy preferences related to postsecondary education



Centering Rural Voices: Pathway Participant Surveys

- We will be launching learner cohorts in 2026 and 2027, and we will conduct evaluative activities.
- In addition to state/system/institutional data, we will be surveying pathway participants to better understand their experiences.
- These will inform pathway refinement and expansion in states, as well as support revisions of the Rural Talent Lab model for future iterations.



Inaugural Cohort:



KANSAS

MONTANA



Readiness Accelerator Track

- In addition to the five selected states, we are pivoting to initiate a “Readiness Accelerator Track” for 11 other states.
- This track will involve opportunities to attend certain Rural Talent Lab events, attend virtual learning events, engage with selected state teams, and learn from experts on and beyond the project team.
- **Goal:** Exposing additional states to the Rural Talent Lab model and approach as a means for preparing more states to take on this work in future cohorts (or do so independent of the Rural Talent Lab).

To Summarize...

- Build relationships in rural communities. It will take time, but it will be worthwhile.
- Acknowledge that rural folks are experts, and rural communities have many assets.
 - But, also, that social problems manifest differently in rural places, thus requiring different solutions.
- Listen to rural voices when designing and implementing programs and policies.
 - Use what you learn as part of the process.
- **Keep showing up!**

Thank you!

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