

# ■ State college as an answer to rural American education needs

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*Rural America struggles as a socioeconomic entity. While the community college has been an essential response to some of the needs of rural American higher education, the community college mission is not comprehensive enough to provide complete higher education needs. Four-year degree options are necessary for rural America to progress in economic growth. The answer to the need could be the state college as defined in this article.*

EDUCATION AS THE KEY TO SUCCESS reverberates throughout American culture. People with higher levels of education statistically earn a higher level of income and therefore arguably a higher quality of life. Today, some training beyond high school is needed for almost every occupation, even at entry levels. McDonald's has its own university. Certification requirements are common for most trades. Higher education offers some certification programs as do trade organizations themselves. Degrees, including the associate, bachelor, master, and doctorate, are viewed as essential for success. But, is access to higher education available to everyone? Theoretically, it should be, but...realistically, is it? Unfortunately, for many people in rural America it is not. The present article focuses on one aspect of inequality in access to higher education. It addresses changes that could alleviate a few barriers and addresses possible solutions that could increase opportunities for higher education in rural America.

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## Background and literature

### Demographics

Rural America continues to face cultural changes that threaten its stability, changes that have a direct bearing on the challenges in rural American education. In the 1950s, the demographics of rural America were much different than today. Four out of every 10 rural people lived on a farm, and almost a third of the nation's rural workforce was engaged directly in agriculture. At that time, public policy related to agriculture was a dominant force shaping rural farm life. Today, commodity-based farm policies do not fully address the complexities of rural economies and populations. Farms are larger and more efficient, farm households depend more on off-farm income, and rural communities look for non-farm sources of economic growth. In current rural America, less than 10 percent of people live on a farm, and only 14 percent of the rural workforce is employed in farming (Whitener, 2005).

Diversity and the results of changing cultures have also affected rural America. Growing numbers of Hispanics settling in rural America account for over 25 percent of non-metro population growth during the 1990s (Labor & Education, 2006). With a younger population and higher fertility rate, Hispanics are the fastest growing racial/ethnic group in rural America. In many areas, new Hispanic settlement patterns are contribut-

ing to the revitalization of small towns. Yet, the younger age, lower education, and large family size of many Hispanic households suggest increased demands for social services, including prenatal care, child care, and education programs.

The influx of Hispanic populations into rural America creates additional concerns. Typically, Hispanic immigrants are less educated than their rural American counterparts which throws the pendulum of education disparity even further in the wrong direction. However, through higher education strategies, rural America could begin to generate new employment and income opportunities, develop local human resources, and build or expand critical infrastructure that holds the most promise for enhancing the economic well-being of rural America (Labor & Education, 2006). Some rural communities have changed dramatically due to increased population from urban areas, shifts in age and ethnic composition, and economic and industrial restructuring. Increasing competition from abroad and categorical shifts in employment present further challenges in a worldwide economy.

An overall rural American population growth increase started in the 1990s. The increase was over 10 percent, up from 3-percent growth in the previous decade. Migration continues to fuel rapid population growth in *some* rural American areas. But, overall growth began to slow at mid-decade, and the number of rural American areas that

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have lost population has climbed dramatically. While population loss affects many rural areas, it is particularly widespread in the Great Plains, an area that depends heavily on farming. Maintaining the population base, improving off-farm job opportunities, and providing public services continue to be long-term challenges for traditionally farming areas (Labor & Education, 2006). A collection of data that is relevant to the makeup of rural America and influential to education in these areas follows (Labor & Education, 2006):

- *Low-education* (622 total, 499 non-metro) counties are those where 25 percent or more of residents age 25 to 64 had neither a high school diploma nor a GED (General Educational Development) diploma in 2000.
- *Low-employment* (460 total, 396 non-metro) counties are those where less than 65 percent of residents age 21 to 64 were employed in 2000.
- *Persistent poverty* (386 total, 340 non-metro) counties are those where 20 percent or more of residents were poor as measured by each of the last four censuses (1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000).
- *Farming-dependent* (440 total, 403 non-metro) counties are those with either 15 percent or more of average annual labor and proprietors' earnings derived from farming during 1998-2000 or 15 percent or more of residents employed in farm occupations in 2000.
- *Mining-dependent* (128 total, 113 non-metro) counties are those with 15 percent or more of average annual labor and proprietors' earnings derived from mining during 1998-2000.
- *Manufacturing-dependent* (905 total, 585 non-metro) counties are those with 25 percent or more of average annual labor and proprietors' earnings derived from manufacturing during 1998-2000.

The statistics are alarming and indicate that rural America as an entity lacks sufficient higher education. Poor, underemployed, under educated—typically farmers, miners, and manufacturing line employees—describe the principal socio-economic makeup of rural America.

How can rural communities successfully build on their economic base and other assets to retain and attract population and employment? When, where, and under what circumstances will rural development strategies be most successful? Demographic change, the health of the Nation's economy, rural American higher education, and industrial restructuring will be major factors affecting rural policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Whitener, 2005). How higher education changes in rural America to effectively address the challenges will increasingly influence how rural America evolves or even succeeds.

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## Community colleges and rural America

With the creation of Joliet College in Illinois around the turn of the twentieth century, the two-year college began in a constant state of evolution. Community colleges appeared in rural America in the early 1960s as one answer to its higher education needs. When society's education needs shifted direction from the junior college, the comprehensive mission of what has become known as the community college began to reflect five traditional parts: (a) career education and preparation of students for an occupation, (b) compensatory education and enhancement through remedial studies, (c) community education and reaching out with extended services, (d) collegiate functions and new directions for the liberal arts, and (e) general education and the development of an integrated curriculum (Deegan & Tillery, 1985). The community college thus provides post-secondary education and lower-level tertiary education, the granting of certificates, diplomas, and associate degrees. The name derives from the fact that "community colleges" primarily attract and accept students from the local community. They offer "open admission"; that is, anyone may be admitted, unlike universities. They are supported by public funds, and their tuition costs are substantially less than those of a traditional four-year public or private college or university. For these reasons, low-income students and students

not yet academically prepared for a university curriculum are attracted to community colleges. So it is not surprising, with such a comprehensive mission, that the community college would appear to satisfy the higher education needs of rural America.

Duea (1981) indicated that a critical issue for the future of community colleges would be the changing mission and purpose of these institutions. As the community college has dealt with its changing mission and purpose, it has faced the challenge of trying to create a *pathway* for the fulfillment of its broad educational objectives. Alfred & Smydra (1985) have stated that community colleges in the future will be faced with problems affecting their status as self-governing institutions of higher education. These problems, which most emphatically include a mission too comprehensive to be effective in all things, will put pressure on community college faculty and administration to evaluate the utility of academics and service to local communities, states, and society as a whole. Comprehensive objectives, as a mission for community colleges, is almost impossible in all instances, especially in rural areas where the funding mechanism and the reasons to fund are not prominent. How very true the prediction of Alfred & Smydra has become, especially for rural America.

Rubin and Autry (1998) have explained that rural American community colleges face different and sometimes much greater chal-

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lenges than those in metropolitan schools. Indeed, the people of rural America are almost invisible to policy makers. They simply cannot be heard since they are such a small minority. A demographic and political rural majority occurs in only five states, and even in states such as California which has 2.2 million rural people, they constitute less than eight percent of the total population (MREA, 2006).

What makes it so difficult for higher education in rural America to succeed? The following at least partially explains why:

- Rural colleges are small. Nearly one-third of rural community colleges have fewer than 1,000 students, and two-thirds have enrollment below 2,500 ... small colleges struggle to remain afloat financially.
- Rural service areas tend to be large, which makes for high cost per student.
- Rural colleges have a big mission and it is too easy to say, "If small colleges are not financially viable, shut them down" (Rubin and Autry, 1998).

Bear (2006) states that community colleges in rural America are facing the largest challenges ever today:

- Increasing reliance on global connections, even in isolated environments
- Rising credential and skill needs of employers in rural areas
- Academic needs of students

- Low skill and literacy levels among potential students
- Increasing diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, and academic achievement
- A proliferation of community college missions that threatens to fragment its purpose.

### **The role of the university**

The most common philosophies for universities have evolved from highly influential men with very different points of view. Wolff describes the evolution of the university at the beginning of the twenty-first century into four categories that emerged from two strong and contrasting philosophies. One was professed by Robert Hutchins, past president of the University of Chicago whose tenure began in 1929, and the other by Clark Kerr, founding president and the innovator of the University of California System. Hutchins, a Yale man wrote,

There is a conflict between one aim to the university, the pursuit of truth for its own sake, and another which is to profess too, the preparation of men and women for their life work. This is not a conflict between education and research. It is a conflict between two kinds of education . . . all that can be learned in a university is the general principles, the fundamental propositions, the theory of any discipline. (Ashmore, 1995, p. 33, 48)

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Kerr's perception, however, focused more specifically upon life preparation.

Whatever the individual university philosophy may be, neither is currently woven into rural America. Rural Americans either fail at formal secondary education or conclude their education at the end of high school, continue on to a nearby community college for certification or an associate degree, continue from the community college to the university setting, make good enough grades from high school to secure scholarships and directly attend a university away from their rural home. Cohen and Brawer (1996) say, "For thousands of [rural] students, the choice is not between a community college and another institution of higher education; the choice is between a community college and nothing." There seem to be few choices for rural Americans seeking higher education beyond two-year programs; yet the community college, which has already established roots into rural America, could be the foundation for expanded higher education opportunities.

## **Confronting the issue**

The community college concept has flourished in American culture, seemingly the answer for what everyone thought was the gap between high school education and university idealism. But the concept will never be fully realized; it simply cannot since its scope is too large. The community college com-

prehensive mission tries to do too much, yet in some places it is not doing enough.

[Community college] education is facing tsunami-like changes. Whether the factors of change are demographic, global, economic, technological, or financial, all are coming together in what some have called the perfect storm. Higher education in general and rural education in particular must ... [explore] new directions, new pathways of doing business. (Bear, 2006)

Perhaps the traditional community college model most comfortably fits urban, inner city, and suburban America where comprehensive goals are more fiscally realistic with numerous people per square mile and a larger tax base. Rural colleges, and those who are responsible for them, must rethink practical priorities in relation to what they currently attempt to offer comprehensively. One possibility they must consider is offering four-year degrees strategically applicable to the needs of their respective rural areas.

The California Performance Review has critically assessed common voids within California higher education. The report states,

Establishing new and creative bachelor degree programs at community colleges is a strategy to increase college participation rates for local residents who are unable to relocate because of family

or work commitments. To address the needs of rural communities and the state's need for additional bachelor degree-trained individuals in high demand disciplines, community colleges should be permitted to award bachelor's degrees. (CVC, 2006)

Best Educational Practices (2001) states:

The idea of offering bachelors and other advanced degrees in a community college setting

has become a reality in the last five years. This year, St. Petersburg College became a four-year institution. Also, its University Partnership Center now offers degrees up to the doctoral level, partnering with twelve universities in and outside Florida.

Other two-year colleges are offering four-year degree opportunities. Miami Dade, the largest community college district in the United States and one that serves

**Table 1. A partial list of two-year colleges that offer bachelor degrees (Best Educational Practices, 2001)**

Dalton State College, part of the University System of Georgia, Dalton, Georgia.	Offering bachelor's degrees since 1999 in Industrial Operations Management, Management Information Systems and Applied Science in Technology Management
Dixie State College, St. George, Utah	Given a name change and bachelor degree status in 2000, the school offers bachelor degrees in Business Administration and Computer and Information Technology.
Louisiana State University, Alexandria, Louisiana.	Granted four-year status during the 2001 legislative session, the school plans to offer bachelor's degrees in elementary education, general business, general studies, biology, and nursing in the 2002-2003 school year.
Utah Valley State College. (formerly Utah Valley Community College), Orem, Utah	The status and name of the college were changed in 1993. It now offers bachelor's degrees in Business Management; Computer Science and Information Systems; Technology Management; Elementary Education; Hospitality Management; Accounting; Behavioral Science; Biology; Fire Services Administration; Paralegal Studies; Criminal Justice; Aviation Professional Pilot; and English.
University of Arkansas at Fort Smith (formerly Westark Community College), Fort Smith, Arkansas	Established by the state General Assembly as a "unique community college" in 1997, UAFS was authorized to offer a degree in Manufacturing Technology Management, as well as seven others to be determined by demonstrated demand within the next four years.

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some rural areas in the state of Florida, has begun the process.

Miami-Dade Community College is adopting a new name: Miami-Dade College. The Florida Legislature approved the name change, following similar approval from the college's Board of Trustees. Officials at the community college, the nation's largest, said the name reflects a more comprehensive curriculum. Beginning in September, the college will offer programs leading to a bachelor's degree in education. (Miami Dade, 2006)

The four-year degree potential at the community college could be a step toward meeting the higher education needs of rural America. "Traditional thinking, based on past experiences and marked by limitations, does not benefit millions of students who will need a baccalaureate degree.... Rather, consider community colleges.... The community college baccalaureate degree is a logical solution...." (Walker, 2006).

### **Bachelor of Applied Science degree**

One of the best strategies for offering four-year degrees at the community college level is the bachelor of Applied Science Degree because it builds on applied education, a primary goal of the community college. Great Basin College in Northeastern Nevada provides a good example. It offers a Bachelor

of Applied Science program designed specifically for students who have earned an associate degree at that institution or elsewhere. The Bachelor of Applied Science degree *builds* upon the associate degree, work experience, and maturity. It can provide a student with communication and problem solving skills, management and organizational theories and practice, technical and mathematical competencies, and a broad liberal arts view of the world and workplace. The degree prepares students for employment in demanding technical or *applied* positions in many fields. An advantage of the degree is that students who pursue an applied associates degree can plug their degree into a four-year applied model and continue their studies.

In another setting—the School of Technology and Career Education at Southwest Missouri State University's West Plains Campus—one of the principal goals was to make it possible for people entering a new two-year technical degree program with the prospect of continuing their education and obtaining a four-year degree. Based upon needs analysis studies, the college sought to create degree paths that would help meet the region's technical needs, primarily manufacturing based. The largest concern of plant managers from West Plains and adjoining communities was not having enough local people sufficiently educated to qualify them as potential managers. At the time, in order to fill the managerial positions, they went outside of the

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rural area to urban, education-rich pools of possible employees. Those people typically hired would work for just a few years, obtain useful experience, and then move back to where they came from, qualified for job promotions. Plant managers wanted people, qualified and educated, who would stay. Native rural individuals who completed their education would be more likely to stay.

The Applied Science degree not only helps people in and around West Plains, Missouri, but any student who builds on a two-year technical degree by attending what is now called Missouri State University in pursuit of a bachelor of applied science degree.

**West Plains, Missouri,  
Chamber of Commerce  
Manufacturing List:**

Successful businesses from nearly every field call West Plains home. From food processing to engine rebuilding, woodworking to shoe manufacturing, the wide range of industries protects the local economy if any one of them experiences a slowdown. Some of the largest employers include Armstrong–Bruce Hardwood floors, Systems and Electronics Inc. (SEI), Invensys, Ozarks Medical Center, Caterpillar, Royal Oak Enterprises, Arlee Home Fashions, Motor Technologies Group, Air Evac Lifeteam, and Gardner Shoe Company. (West Plains Chamber, 2006)

Many industries have found their way into rural America pursuing a labor force that generally works for lower wages. With alterations to technical schools and community colleges in rural America, there could be an even greater stable technical force to occupy jobs in local industry. However, many businesses still cannot find an educated pool of people in rural America that fits the need for upper level managerial positions. The bachelor of Applied Science Degree provides education necessary for managers and leaders in rural American industry, thus expanding the feasibility of rural industry.

The University of Montana School of Technology and the University of Minnesota College of Continuing Education are two more of several universities that offer a Bachelor of Applied Science degree for students transferring with two-year applied science degrees. However, effective they may be for transfer education or students who transfer, their existence does not completely address the specific higher education needs of rural America, which lacks direct access to four-year degrees.

The Nevada University System has recognized that state's need and created what is now called the Nevada State College.

Founded in 2002, Nevada State College was established to meet the needs of students who are interested in bachelor's degrees in much-needed fields such as nursing

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and education, as well as in other disciplines in the arts and sciences. Course work is fully transferable to both the first tier (universities) and the third tier (community colleges) in Nevada's higher education system. NSC is committed to providing the highest quality of instruction, as well as mentoring and advising services, to every student ... The college helps address Nevada's need for increased access to higher education for students entering the higher education system and for students transferring from the state's community colleges. (NSC, 2006)

As seen in Nevada, the *state college* has been newly created to facilitate needs beyond and apart from the community college.

## Conclusion

America's current answer to the higher education needs of rural America is the community college. As a whole, the community college struggles to find its identity while

attempting to fill the gaps that exist between high school and four-year institutions or universities. Rural America is currently being educated primarily by community colleges, which are not completely prepared to meet the economic needs as expressed in their mission statements let alone higher education beyond the two-year degree. What then is the answer to meeting the higher education needs of rural America?

State legislatures and regents must open their minds, or rural America could continue to fall further behind in socioeconomic development. Changes in institution mission and direction can be addressed using the existing community college platform to incorporate bachelor's degrees including—but not limited to—the bachelor of applied science degree. Utah and Nevada have set the precedent for calling such an institution “the State College.” With expansion of higher education opportunities in rural America, the American Dream again becomes a possibility for all.

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