

Make Rural America's “Higher Education Deserts” Bloom

As many as 41 million Americans live in “higher education deserts” – at least half an hour’s drive from the nearest college or university and with limited access to community college. Many of these deserts are in rural America, which is one reason so much of rural America is less prosperous than it deserves to be.

The lack of higher education access means fewer opportunities for going back to school or improving skills. A less educated workforce in turn means communities have a tougher time attracting businesses and creating new jobs. Congress should work to eradicate higher education deserts. In particular, it can encourage new models of higher education – such as “higher education centers” and virtual colleges – that can fill this gap and bring more opportunity to workers and their communities. **Rural higher education innovation grants** are one potential way to help states pilot new approaches.

THE CHALLENGE:

HIGHER EDUCATION “DESERTS” ARE HANDICAPPING RURAL AMERICA

For millions of Americans, distance is as big or bigger a barrier to higher education access as finances. According to the Urban Institute,

nearly one in five American adults—as many as 41 million people—lives twenty-five miles or more from the nearest college or university, or in areas where a single community college is the only source of broad-access public higher education within that distance. Three million of the Americans in these so-called “higher education deserts” also lack broadband internet, which means they are cut off from online education opportunities as well.¹

Rural students have lower rates of college-going and completion.

More than four in five people in higher education deserts – 82 percent – live in rural areas. This could be one reason why fewer rural Americans attend or finish college.

In 2016, 61 percent of rural public school seniors went on to college the following year, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, compared to 67 percent for suburban students.² Only 20 percent of rural young adults between 25 and 34 have four-year degrees, says the USDA's Economic Research Service, compared to 37 percent of young adults in urban areas.³ Moreover, the urban-rural gap in college degree attainment is growing. From 2000 to 2015, the share of college-educated adults rose by 7-points in urban locales compared to 4-points in rural areas.

Less-educated rural areas are falling behind while better educated cities leap ahead.

With more and more jobs demanding ever higher levels of skill, disparities in access to higher education are translating to vast disparities in the distribution of jobs and opportunity throughout the United States, including a widening urban-rural divide. Wealthy urban areas are getting richer, while rural areas are increasingly lagging.

The Economic Innovation Group (EIG), for instance, reports that of the 6.8 million net new jobs created between 2000 and 2015, 6.5 million were created in the top 20 percent of zip codes, which were predominantly urban.⁴ These prosperous, job-creating zip codes are also the best-educated. EIG further finds that 43 percent of residents in the top 10 percent of zip codes has a bachelor's degree or better, compared to just 11 percent in the bottom 10 percent. While a four-year degree is of course not a prerequisite for a good living, the heavy concentration of highly-educated workers is indicative of the imbalance in economic opportunities between rural and urban areas.

Most of the nation's least educated and most impoverished counties are rural.

If education and prosperity are linked, so conversely are poverty and the lack of educational attainment.

Out of 467 U.S. counties identified by the USDA as “low education” counties – places where 20 percent or more of the population has less than a high school diploma – 79 percent are rural.⁵ These counties tend to be clustered in the rural South, Appalachia, along the Texas border and in Native American reservations and also suffer from higher rates of poverty, child poverty and unemployment.

THE GOAL:

ERADICATE HIGHER EDUCATION DESERTS AND ENSURE EVERY RURAL AMERICAN HAS HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS

Better access to higher education in rural areas, especially for the many millions of “nontraditional” students who are now increasingly the norm,⁶ can help close the gulf in opportunity between urban and rural areas. Greater opportunities for convenient, affordable higher education would allow more rural Americans to finish their degrees or pursue occupational credentials, qualifying them for higher-skilled, better-paid jobs. Rural students would also benefit by not being forced to leave home for school – not only lowering costs for students but potentially slowing or even reversing the population declines plaguing rural areas. Institutions of higher education can also serve as engines of economic development in the communities they serve. They can work with businesses to turn out the skilled talent they need and provide research or other support.

THE PLAN:

CREATE RURAL HIGHER EDUCATION INNOVATION GRANTS TO ENCOURAGE NEW MODELS OF HIGHER EDUCATION REACHING RURAL AMERICA

While it's unrealistic to establish a new college, community college or university in every rural area that needs one, emerging models for delivering higher education potentially offer a creative, cost-effective and effective alternative. These new models can also expand the ability of workers to obtain high-quality occupational credentials, which in many instances are likely to be more practical, affordable and desirable than pursuing a two-year or four-year degree.

Some states, such as Pennsylvania, Virginia and Maryland, are pioneering new approaches, such as “higher education centers” and virtual colleges, that use technology to broaden students' options for both traditional college education and occupational training.⁷ The Northern Pennsylvania Regional College, for instance, operates six different “hubs” scattered throughout the 7,000 square miles it serves,

plus numerous “classrooms” using borrowed space from local high schools, public libraries and other community buildings. In addition to conferring its own degrees, it provides the infrastructure for other accredited institutions to extend their reach through “blended” offerings combining virtual and in-person teaching.

Similarly, Virginia’s five higher education centers provide physical infrastructure for colleges and community colleges offering classes as well as occupational training in fields such as welding, mechatronics and IT certification. In Maryland, the Southern Maryland Higher Education Center offers specific courses from ten different institutions, including Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland. Though relatively new, these institutions are already establishing a track record of success. In South Boston, Virginia, for instance, the Southern Virginia Higher Education Center worked with more than 30 area industries and entrepreneurs in 2017, developed customized training for nearly 150 workers in local companies and placed 173 students into new jobs.⁸

Congress should encourage all states to make rural higher education a priority and help more states experiment with new models for accessing higher education in remote areas. One way to do this is to provide seed money in the form of *Rural Higher Education Innovation Grants* so that states can stand up pilots, evaluate the effectiveness of new models and scale up promising approaches. These grants moreover do not need to be large – the Pennsylvania legislature initially appropriated just \$1.2 million to launch what is now NPRC.

As a start, Congress should set aside \$10 million in competitive grant funding for states. Funding for these grants could come from an earmark of the money collected from the 1.4 percent excise tax on large university endowments included in the 2017 tax legislation.⁹

Contact:

Anne Kim | Vice President, Domestic Policy

akim@ppionline.org | [@Anne_S_Kim](https://twitter.com/Anne_S_Kim)

Endnotes

- 1 Victoria Rosenboom and Kristin Blagg, *Disconnected from Higher Education: How Geography and Internet Speed Limit Access to Higher Education*, Feb. 2, 2018, Urban Institute.
- 2 *High School Benchmarks 2017: National College Progression Rates*, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017HSBenchmarksReport-1.pdf>
- 3 U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Rural Education at a Glance*, 2017 Edition, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/employment-education/rural-education/>
- 4 Economic Innovation Group, *Escape Velocity: How Elite Communities Are Pulling Away in the 21st Century Race for Jobs, Businesses and Human Capital*, May 2018.
- 5 *Rural Education at a Glance*.
- 6 National Center for Education Statistics, *Demographic and Enrollment Characteristics of Nontraditional Undergraduates: 2011–12*, September 2015, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf>
- 7 Anne Kim, "An Innovative Fix for Rural Higher Education Deserts," September/October 2018, *Washington Monthly*.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, Public Law 115-97



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Progressive Policy Institute
1200 New Hampshire Ave NW,
Suite 575
Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202.525.3926
Fax 202.525.3941

info@ppionline.org
progressivepolicy.org