Chapter 2

The Role of Rural Community Colleges in Preparing a Twenty-First Century Workforce

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ABSTRACT

Community colleges play an ever-increasing role in educating residents across the country, and this is certainly true in rural places. Rural community colleges provide critical educational opportunities to rural populations, and, as such, have an inextricable link to workforce development and economic prosperity in these communities. As rural industries continue to evolve, it is necessary for workers to obtain new or upgraded skills in order to remain competitive and for rural communities to survive. This chapter highlights the ways in which rural communities are changing and the critical role rural community colleges play in educating a modern and competitive rural workforce.

INTRODUCTION

Rural America has long been romanticized in our national culture and viewed as the “Heartland,” with communities where traditional values and strong families remain protected and nurtured. Through Little House On The Prairie, Laura Ingalls Wilder introduced generations to a bucolic rural setting, “A Prairie Home Companion” has delivered rural culture to countless listeners via radio waves, and the popular television series Friday Night Lights depicted the importance of high school football to a community in rural Texas. So there is no doubt that rural communities and citizens can be seen throughout American arts and popular culture, leaving nearly everyone with a perceived familiarity with these places and their residents. However, these depictions can often belie the challenges, complexities, and changes bearing down heavily upon these communities.

According to the 2010 Census, the United States is home to approximately 60 million rural residents, and rural lands cover the majority of the country. Concordantly, much of our national food supply and energy infrastructure are highly dependent upon these places. Further, rural locales are home to the locks,
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dams, fiber optic lines, railroads, and ports that are absolutely essential to the economic prosperity of the country as a whole (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Although their importance in our national economy may be clear, rural communities often fail to reap the same prosperity as urban and suburban places. This can be seen in the form of higher levels of poverty (Lichter, Roscigno, & Condron, 2003), lower levels of education (Brown & Schafft, 2011), and outmigration (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

These challenges are further exacerbated by the economic shifts that have been taking place in rural communities as a result of technological advancement and globalization. Many traditional rural industries are heavily reliant upon natural resources, including minerals, valuable metals, nutrient-rich soil, and crude oil, but these industries can bring adverse economic patterns to these vulnerable communities. For example, communities dependent upon agriculture have experienced prolonged economic decline, and those centered around oil or mining can experience boom-and-bust cycles that start with the discovery of the resource and end when the resource has been exhausted (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Nationwide, even industries that are not reliant upon natural resources have also experienced downturns; manufacturing jobs nationwide have been outsourced to other countries with less-expensive labor or been eliminated due to industrial automation. As a result of these shifts, the service and tourism/recreation sectors have come to comprise a larger share of rural economies (Brown & Shafft, 2011). One of the consequences of these changes is the need for rural residents to upgrade or modify their skills, and the rural community college has a considerable part to play in this effort.

Community colleges have a legacy of providing accessible educational opportunities with a focus on serving their local community (Cohen & Brawer, 2009). Rural community colleges, in particular, have played a key role in delivering technical training, workforce development, and contract instruction to rural communities (Warren, 2000). As the energy sector shifts to renewable sources, as agriculture becomes more sustainable, and as advancing technology automates and transforms heavy industry, it will be essential to provide learning opportunities for rural residents in order to maintain economic relevance. These various changes have one thing in common: they are going to largely occur in rural areas (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). These places contain and support the energy, food, and transportation infrastructures upon which the rest of the country relies. Given the history of community colleges in providing responsive and relevant technical education, such institutions in rural communities are the ideal place to provide this next round of skills upgrades.

This chapter aims to underscore the important role rural communities play in our overall national prosperity. Further, an overview of the challenges facing rural residents is presented, along with a discussion of the economic changes that have been taking place in these communities. Finally, this chapter will discuss the role of rural community colleges in preparing skilled workers for the decades ahead and aiding in the survival and prosperity of rural communities nationwide.

BACKGROUND

Rural communities across the United States have long served an important role in providing the resources and labor necessary for national growth. However, because of their small size, their remoteness, and their diminished access to social services, these places have often been left exploited and forgotten rather than sharing in the wealth that accrued in urban and suburban areas. Over the course of decades, this situation has resulted in the emergence and persistence of unique challenges that impact all facets of rural life.