



Sowing New Fields

Innovative programs work to link rural learners to good-paying jobs, with an eye towards growing small-town economies



PHOTO BY ISTOCK

As the national economy continues to create jobs around the nation, one region has been left behind: rural America. For many of the 46 million Americans who live well outside major population centers, finding a job that pays a living wage qualifies as a major challenge. That number comes from a recent [report on rural community colleges](#) from the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program.

Outside of the boom-and-bust cycles surrounding energy fracking and tourism, rural areas have struggled to grow their economies at the same rate as the rest of the U.S. Non-metro areas have lost ground in job creation compared to urban areas each year since 2009, according to a [federal report](#).

Bearing the brunt are workers who often live far from employment hubs and in areas that are becoming even more depopulated. Small towns and remote counties often lack the infrastructure needed to create

Rural areas have struggled to grow their economies at the same rate as the rest of the U.S.

salaried professions; workers residing in these areas are more likely than their urban counterparts to lack the broadband capability needed to work remotely.

And many of them hold traditional notions about what constitutes work, leading them to seek jobs that no longer are in demand or that don't pay well. Rural workers generally must survive on lower incomes than those who work in the cities or suburbs.

[Around one in three](#) people in urban areas have earned bachelor's degrees, compared to 19 percent of rural residents. But access to a four-year degree doesn't necessarily determine a person's long-term career success.

"People are trying to build pathways to economic opportunity where there are fewer places to go," says David Bevevino, director of research and knowledge management at the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program.

The trick to greening the economic landscape, Bevevino and others say, may lie in working with what rural America has going for it.

According to the report from the Aspen Institute, there are 1.5 million students who attend 444 rural two-year colleges

Community colleges and nonprofit groups are working to create fresh curricula that improves on existing training-to-work models so rural learners get a leg up in the job market.

nationwide. Several organizations around the country, aided by seven-figure grants from Ascendium, are working to utilize close-knit local ties and strengthen rural infrastructure by linking some of those students with employers in their regions who need more skilled workers.

Community colleges and nonprofit groups are working to create fresh curricula that improves on existing training-to-work models so rural learners get a leg up in the job market. By supplying would-be workers with stronger connections to rural employers who offer good jobs, institutions and organizations will have a better shot at improving the economies of many teetering small towns.

Creating rural educational programs that lead to more and better job opportunities for students might eventually help [two-year institutions reverse a 37 percent downturn in enrollment since 2010](#).



PHOTO BY ISTOCK

Training for Tomorrow's Jobs

Getting rural residents trained for a modern economy is vital. Some organizations, including the [Rural Innovation Network](#), based at the Center on Rural Innovation, strive to close an opportunity gap between rural and urban workers in technology jobs. For the next three years, the network will work in six communities to increase rural colleges' capacity to train tech workers by aligning curricula with what digital companies need.

"The typical pathway to tech jobs is different in rural areas," says Breyana Rey, director of the Rural Innovation Network.

"The typical pathway to tech jobs is different in rural areas. We're trying to make a connection for the degreed tech worker so they can work where they live and help grow their communities."

"We're trying to make a connection for the degreed tech worker so they can work where they live and help grow their communities. One question we're asking is why, after all the changes we've seen, do

we remain stuck teaching the same way? We're trying to disrupt what a tech class looks like."

The network gets two-year institutions and digital employers together to develop curricula, with an eye toward identifying students who would make strong prospects for tech jobs and giving them the skills necessary to land and keep them.

But the effort involves the whole community. The Rural Innovation Network relies on local groups to start the conversation with colleges and employers, then works to get all three partners to form tighter bonds that make an education-to-jobs pipeline strong and sustainable.

Using economic data from government sources, the network works with these partners to digitally map where employers need workers and what skills they seek. Through regular community meetings, the network also gives its partners the chance to broadcast opportunities to people not already tied to colleges or well-paying jobs.

Many people in rural areas don't know that tech companies operate locally, Rey adds. Others don't consider digital work as a career. Reaching them through community college programs and town meetings help the network grow the program. "There's an awareness gap we're trying

to fill," she says. "Often, digital jobs exist in rural areas. People just don't know that they can get them."

Of the six areas the network works with, two are in predominantly-Black regions in Alabama. Two other areas—one in Arizona and one in New Mexico—have sizable populations of Native Americans.

Organizations are increasingly mindful of the need to create opportunity for people from underrepresented groups. The Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program reported that nearly one in three students at rural two-year colleges is a person of color. As towns dotting the countryside continually become more diverse, reaching those learners and preparing them for good jobs has become a priority for local community groups, foundations, and government agencies.

As towns dotting the countryside continually become more diverse, reaching those learners and preparing them for good jobs has become a priority for local community groups, foundations, and government agencies.



PHOTO BY ISTOCK

Creating More Internships

The [Local Initiatives Support Corporation](#), or LISC, a foundation-backed, nonprofit economic development group, has started a program to increase the chances that underrepresented rural workers in high-unemployment, low-income regions get good jobs and develop financial security. Central to the effort is linking colleges with federal grant money that helps them expand on-the-job training programs. “We’re pushing for more equity in the rural space to deal with the higher rates of poverty we see there,” says Justin Burch, national director of workforce development at LISC. “Rural America represents 20 percent of the nation, and

“Our members have worked to create models of what works in local economies, but we feel like we haven’t done enough to learn about rural areas.”

yet receives only seven percent of the philanthropy.”

By working with community colleges in regions such as Appalachia, tribal areas in the west, and the Southeast Crescent, LISC looks to develop opportunities in some of the nation’s poorest and most diverse

areas. In partnership with three Mississippi colleges, LISC helped create 11 internships each quarter in well-paid agricultural tech jobs.

“We helped the colleges coordinate their efforts so they could get more input from industries,” Burch says. “This has helped them convert what were once just a handful of industry-based apprenticeships into many more that the federal government helps them pay for, such as those tied to agricultural tech jobs.”

Like the Rural Innovation Network, the LISC program widens the circle to include several different types of groups, with an eye toward getting as much community involvement as possible. LISC emphasizes getting colleges, community organizations, government planning districts, and industry leaders on the same page.

“We connect strategies for developing good jobs with [federal] Bureau of Labor Statistics data so our partners understand what a good mid-level career looks like,” Burch says.

Putting Jobs on the Map

Organizations are helping rural counties and towns understand their employment landscape by contributing to in-depth digital mapping efforts. By helping to provide a strong dataset, groups like the

[Association of Chamber of Commerce Executive Foundation](#) can give colleges and employers better information on where apprenticeships would help improve learners’ skills and where they can develop best practices.

“Our members have worked to create models of what works in local economies, but we feel like we haven’t done enough to learn about rural areas,” says Amy Shields, the group’s executive director.

The association’s program, which began in March and is called the Economic Mobility for Rural Workers Cohort, relies on 11 regional chambers of commerce leaders across the nation who work in rural areas. Those members will draw on methods from chambers, both rural and urban, for ideas on how to improve outcomes for workers in low-income rural areas.

One idea was borrowed from the Omaha chamber: A central location that coordinates information from local job markets and other sources, offers referrals, and helps workers overcome barriers to getting good jobs.

Each of the 11 chambers in the program will measure how many low-income people find well-paid work, the amount of the pay increase, and the effects across ethnic groups and races.

“We’re looking for the information that will allow us to develop scalable models,” Shields says. “Chambers of commerce members are well-positioned to act as a bridge between

companies, colleges, and organizations. If we want to help create economic success broadly around the country, we’ll need to understand these areas better.

Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates, and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, and students of color and veterans. Ascendium’s work identifies, validates, and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system, and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit ascendiumphilanthropy.org.