Addressing Educational Access and Attainment Through Colorado’s Rural-Serving Institutions

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July 2024

Recommended Citation:
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colorado is one of the most educated states in the United States, yet those born and raised in Colorado have fairly low educational attainment. The state views higher education through a neoliberal lens, arguing that changing workforce demands desperately require higher educational attainment from state residents. However, educating state residents also leads to increased health outcomes, cultural development opportunities, and greater civic engagement, which contribute to a greater public well-being. Rural educational attainment in Colorado is low, creating a gap that contributes to the Colorado Paradox and can be addressed through Rural-Serving Institutions. The Colorado Paradox refers to how Colorado is one of the most highly educated states, yet those born and raised in Colorado, overall, have low educational attainment. An expanded Colorado Paradox includes the fact that Colorado has a wide variety of cultural opportunities, healthcare infrastructure, and educational offerings for those residing in Colorado, yet those who are born and raised in Colorado access these offerings less than those from out-of-state. Rural-Serving Institutions are well-positioned to provide greater economic mobility and impact the well-being of their communities, therefore addressing the expanded Colorado Paradox. To do this, Rural-Serving Institutions need greater support so they can grow into anchor institutions for rural regions, providing a myriad of benefits to rural areas and residents. The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) provides federal recommendations for supporting and creating these rural anchor institutions which will ultimately contribute to a flourishing Colorado in all regions.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for Colorado policy leaders are imperative to addressing the expanded Colorado Paradox and creating an equitable and thriving Colorado for all.

1. **Review the audit in this report that outlines policy related to Rural-Serving Institutions in Colorado.**
   The audit is based on federal policy recommendations from ARRC, establishes areas of alignment between federal recommendations and Colorado policy, and identifies state action items to support the growth of rural anchor institutions in Colorado.

2. **Adopt the Rural-Serving Institution designation, created by ARRC, in Colorado.**
INTRODUCTION

Rural-Serving Institutions in Colorado educate a significant portion of Colorado residents and promote economic sufficiency within the state. This policy report examines Rural-Serving Institutions’ potential to become anchor institutions for rural communities throughout Colorado. Anchor institutions are non-governmental organizations that have economic and community significance and provide important infrastructure in communities; they are typically institutions like hospitals, colleges, or museums. This report focuses specifically on how Rural-Serving Institutions in Colorado are poised to become anchor institutions and how state policy should support this objective. The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) introduces federal policy recommendations that support the creation and ongoing sustainability of rural anchor institutions. Through an audit of policy in the Colorado, this report compares state policy to ARRC’s federal policy recommendations, ultimately advocating that Colorado adopt the Rural-Serving Institution designation for rural colleges in the state.

Neoliberalism is omnipresent throughout higher education in Colorado. The motivations of educating Coloradans tends to lie in the fact that workforce demands are changing and more residents will need to obtain postsecondary credentials for overall economic stability. For context, although Colorado is currently the second most highly educated state in the country regarding bachelor’s degree attainment, those who are born and raised in Colorado have relatively low educational attainment. This concept is called the Colorado Paradox and it exists because Colorado does not have a strong focus on educating their own residents, many highly-educated people move to Colorado, and many students move to Colorado to attend higher education.

The Colorado Paradox is commonly discussed in the context of educational attainment and economic stability; however, this paradox can be expanded to relate to educational access and the quality of opportunities, such as cultural development, health outcomes, and civic engagement. Those who move to Colorado tend to move to urban areas or wealthy mountain towns, therefore having increased access to education, cultural opportunities, and healthcare due to robust infrastructure. Those raised in rural Colorado have less access to this infrastructure, given the tendency for most healthcare and cultural and civic events to be in urban areas. Further, rural populations have some of the lowest educational attainment in Colorado. These residents, along with the Rural-Serving Institutions that provide educational access for them, are not discussed within state higher education to the extent they deserve. This gap provides a strong opportunity for Colorado to focus on supporting Rural-Serving Institutions to address the expanded Colorado Paradox in regards to both educational attainment for workforce demands and the additional outcomes discussed. Specifically, supporting the promotion of rural anchor institutions in the state can address an expanded Colorado Paradox because of anchor institutions’ strong focus on community development including cultural opportunities, healthcare, and improved infrastructure. However, the neoliberal state influence on higher education ultimately weakens the mission of Rural-Serving Institutions because it disregards how colleges...
can contribute to public good and well-being without focusing solely on economic gain. These qualities create flourishing communities and are not mutually exclusive from economic gain. To adequately support the missions of these institutions, which tend to include both workforce development goals and public good-oriented goals, Colorado must recognize and value both components of higher education.

**RURAL COLLEGES IN COLORADO PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL ACCESS**

There are 13 institutions in Colorado that are designated as Rural-Serving Institutions by ARRC. Rural-Serving Institutions are identified through metrics that account for the number of rural students colleges serve, the rural relevance of credentials offered (such as agriculture or natural resources), and comparison to other institutions. The Rural-Serving Institutions in Colorado are also rural public colleges. Figure 1 shows

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**FIGURE 1. Rural-Serving Institutions in Colorado**

- **EXISTING HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTION**
  1. Adams State University
  2. Colorado Mountain College
  3. Lamar Community College
  4. Morgan Community College
  5. Otero Junior College
  6. Pueblo Community College
  7. Colorado State University – Pueblo
  8. Trinidad State Junior College

- **EMERGING HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTION**
  9. Colorado Northwestern Community College
  10. Northeastern Junior College
  11. Western Colorado University
  12. Fort Lewis College

- **NO HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTION DESIGNATION**
  13. Colorado Mesa University

**NOTE:**
Colorado Mountain College has 11 locations
how most of these institutions are located west of the Front Range, with only four community colleges making up higher education in eastern Colorado. Despite a lack of density of colleges in rural areas, these institutions provide important educational access for those who do not want to move to urban areas to access higher education. Every Rural-Serving Institution in the state, except Colorado Mesa University, is, at minimum, an emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution. To be an existing Hispanic-Serving Institution, 25% of the student population needs to be Hispanic; the fact that all but one Rural-Serving Institution in Colorado is either a Hispanic-Serving Institution or an emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution exemplifies the diverse population these institutions serve.

COLORADO NEEDS TO INCREASE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The Colorado Paradox is a key component to understanding higher education in Colorado. As Figure 2 shows, overall educational attainment in Colorado seems strong. 42.8% of the population holds a bachelor’s degree or higher degree, and 71.7% of the population has completed some sort of college. These attainment levels are the second highest in the country. However, when examining this data more closely, it is clear that a large portion of the highly educated residents in Colorado are not from Colorado; rather, they moved to Colorado from out of state.

Figure 3 depicts the difference in educational attainment in Colorado between those born and raised in Colorado and those who have migrated to Colorado from out-of-state. Colorado residents from out-of-state have higher levels of educational attainment. Migration to Colorado is predicted to slow down in the coming years and Colorado needs to educate their state population to keep up with changing workforce demands that require increased postsecondary credentials. Rural-Serving Institutions are currently addressing this issue and have the ability to contribute more significantly to this objective if changes to policy are made.
Neoliberalism Does Not Define Rural Education

Neoliberal ideology focuses on higher education as a means to promote a strong economy. Colorado subscribes to this belief, with accountability goals that focus on Coloradans being able to earn a good living after attending higher education and postsecondary credentials as the answer to workforce demands. Though economic sufficiency is extremely important, better health outcomes, cultural development opportunities, and greater civic engagement are also linked to attending college. An expanded Colorado Paradox argues that college access for residents will increase both workforce development goals and additional objectives such as cultural...
accessibility and positive health outcomes. Rural-Serving Institutions tend to support
the idea that higher education provides multiple
benefits for students, with a strong focus
on both workforce development and civic
and community engagement. Rural-Serving
Institutions even have the potential to create
helpful infrastructure, such as healthcare
facilities or cultural museums, with communities;
this addresses the expanded Colorado Paradox.21
Adams State University is an example of
Colorado’s only rural anchor institution that
has implemented many of these structures
to support the San Luis Valley, where they are
located, through mutually beneficial partnerships
with a strong focus on a holistic education.22

“Adams State University’s driving
purpose is to provide equitable
access to education for all.
We promote successful and
engaged lives by caring for,
connecting with, and challenging
our students, campus, and
community. As Colorado’s premier
Hispanic Serving Institution,
Adams State University draws
on its rural location in the
San Luis Valley, to serve and
empower all students,
especially those from historically
underserved populations.”23

Adams State University is Colorado’s
most-affordable state institution with almost
50% of its student body being first-generation
and over 70% of their study body as Pell
Grant-eligible.24 To promote college-going
in the area, Adams State guarantees that
all tuition and fees will be covered for any
Pell Grant-eligible student within the San Luis
Valley.25 This program highlights their
“place-based initiatives” in education, civic
engagement, and business throughout
the region, exemplifying how they implement
a stewardship of place model that emphasizes
the important connections between colleges
and the community.26

Adams State has two extensive programs
that greatly impact the region. One program
addresses shortages in teachers and has clearly
been successful, as Adams State has educated
“73% of teachers and administrators” in the
San Luis Valley. The other program supports
ranchers and farmers, an important economy
in the region, highlighting the specificity of
programs that rural colleges create to support
their community.27 This focus on Adams State
calls attention to the strong impact that rural
anchor institutions can have on specific areas
through increasing educational access, providing
relevant credentials and programs for the
region’s students, and creating strong community
initiatives and partnerships. Adams State
provides both economic impact for the region,
through employing and educating residents
for the changing job market, and contributes
to community well-being goals through
educational access for residents, civic
engagement, and specific rural initiatives.
Rural regions in Colorado could benefit from
more institutions like Adams State.
RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTIONS ARE ADDRESSING DISPARITIES

Rural-Serving Institutions address educational disparities by educating students in rural areas, low-income students, adult students, and in-state students. Figure 4 shows how educational attainment differs by geography. The map on the left shows the percentage of residents who hold a bachelor’s degree or a higher degree by county. The darker colors indicate a higher percentage of residents who hold a bachelor’s degree or more, while the lighter colors indicate lower attainment. Bachelor’s degree attainment by county spans from 9.24% to 62.86%. A higher percentage of the population holds bachelor’s degrees along the Front Range and in a few wealthy counties in the mountains. Not coincidentally, these counties are where people tend to move to from out of state. Figure 4 also shows the location of all the colleges and universities in the state. The areas with more institutions also tend to have more educational attainment, highlighting how educational opportunity is significantly impacted by one’s geography.

FIGURE 4A. Bachelor’s Degree (or More) Attainment Levels by County

Despite lower overall educational attainment in rural areas, Rural-Serving Institutions tend to serve a diverse population and are currently addressing the Colorado Paradox through educating a high percentage of adult learners (ages 25-64), Pell Grant-eligible students, and in-state residents. Figure 5 illustrates the percentage of Pell Grant-eligible and adult

FIGURE 4B. Location of All Institutions in Colorado

Source: ACS 2021 (5-Year Estimates)
students at each Rural-Serving Institution in Colorado, while Figure 6 highlights the high percentages of in-state residents these institutions educate. Combined with the fact that almost all Rural-Serving Institutions in Colorado are, at minimum, emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions, it is clear these institutions are widely addressing Colorado’s educational disparities in an inclusive manner.\textsuperscript{32}

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**RECOMMENDATION 1**

Review the audit below regarding policy relating to Rural-Serving Institutions in Colorado. The audit is based on federal policy recommendations from ARRC, establishes areas of alignment between federal recommendations and Colorado policy, and identifies state action items to support the growth of rural anchor institutions in Colorado.

Colorado has some state policy that aligns with ARRC’s federal recommendations regarding the support of rural anchor institutions. The table on page 13 outlines ARRC’s federal policy recommendations, relevant policy in Colorado, and the state department or organization that supports the policy. That being said, some of Colorado’s policy, while related to ARRC’s specific recommendation, is incomplete and does not fully encompass the intention of the recommendation.

The most comprehensive programs in Colorado address rural public health and economic development. The focus on the economy aligns with the neoliberal tenet that economic sustainability is the focus of Colorado higher education, while the healthcare priority emphasizes the need for greater healthcare across the state. Almost all of the health-professional shortage-identified areas are rural counties of Colorado.\textsuperscript{33} This is something that rural anchor institutions may be able to help address. Specifically, Colorado passed a recent law allowing colleges to create rural-serving healthcare tracks that include scholarships for students willing to serve in rural areas after graduating.\textsuperscript{34} This initiative incentivizes healthcare professionals to practice in rural areas to support regional health. Further, graduates of healthcare tracks are supported through the Colorado Health Service Corps Provider Loan Repayment Program which provides loan forgiveness for healthcare workers who practice in a “health-professional shortage area of Colorado.”\textsuperscript{35} These healthcare-focused programs support rural institution partnerships with their community through creating opportunities for healthcare professionals to be educated about rural health and incentivizes graduated professionals to work in areas with healthcare shortages.

However, ARRC recommends that the federal government should also incentivize close collaboration between rural institutions, hospitals, and clinics, allowing for healthcare students to obtain valuable experience through internship or clinical placements in the region.\textsuperscript{36} Colorado currently does not incentivize these partnerships. Additionally, there isn’t any state funding set aside for rural institutions to create their own hospital or clinic in the area, which could support the creation of anchor institutions.\textsuperscript{37}

A couple of initiatives led by the Colorado Department of Economic and International Trade align with ARRC’s federal policy recommendations regarding rural anchor
FIGURE 5.
Percentage of Pell Grant-Eligible and Adult Students at Rural Public Colleges in Colorado

- Western Colorado University
- Trinidad State Junior College
- Colorado State University - Pueblo
- Pueblo Community College
- Otero Junior College
- Northeastern Junior College
- Morgan Community College
- Colorado Mesa University
- Lamar Community College
- Fort Lewis College
- Colorado Northwestern Community College
- Colorado Mountain College
- Adams State University

Source: Korich, et al. 2022

FIGURE 6.
Percentage of In-State Residents Enrolled at Rural Public Colleges
(3 year average, 2017–2019)

- Western Colorado University
- Trinidad State Junior College
- Colorado State University - Pueblo
- Pueblo Community College
- Otero Junior College
- Northeastern Junior College
- Morgan Community College
- Colorado Mesa University
- Lamar Community College
- Fort Lewis College
- Colorado Northwestern Community College
- Colorado Mountain College
- Adams State University

Source: Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2021

Addressing Educational Access and Attainment Through Colorado's Rural-Serving Institutions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>FEDERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS</strong></th>
<th><strong>RELATED COLORADO POLICY AND LAW</strong></th>
<th><strong>RELEVANT COLORADO DEPARTMENT OR ORGANIZATION</strong></th>
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<td>Incentivize partnerships between rural hospitals, clinics, and colleges</td>
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<td>Create funding for Rural-Serving Institutions to establish health clinics and hospitals</td>
<td>Colorado Rural Health-care Workforce Initiative</td>
<td>Colorado Department of Higher Education</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>University of Colorado’s School of Medicine Rural Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loan forgiveness for health science graduates</td>
<td>Colorado Health Service Corps Provider Loan Repayment Program</td>
<td>Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment</td>
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<td>Regional Commissions encouraging entrepreneurship and economic development</td>
<td>Rural-Jump Start Program</td>
<td>Office of Economic Development and International Trade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modify rural business development grants</td>
<td>Regional Talent Development Initiative Grant Program</td>
<td>Office of Economic Development and International Trade</td>
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<td>Expand existing federal workforce development programs</td>
<td>Native workforce program</td>
<td>Denver Indian Center AmeriCorps Community Resource Center</td>
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<td>AmeriCorps in rural Colorado</td>
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<td>Increase Pell Grants for rural Americans</td>
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<td>Provide childcare for rural students attending college</td>
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<td>TEACH grants for teachers in rural regions</td>
<td>Rural School District Teaching Fellowship Program</td>
<td>Colorado Department of Education</td>
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<td>Lower Minority-Serving Institution enrollment threshold for Rural-Serving Institutions</td>
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<td>Rural-Serving Institutions eligible to participate in Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge</td>
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<td>Community Facilities Program created for Rural-Serving Institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create a Rural-Serving Institution designation</td>
<td>Action needed</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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</table>
institutions. The Rural-Jump Start Program provides grant funding for those looking to start a local business in an economically-distressed rural area of Colorado and allows higher education institutions to participate as a sponsor for the business. This creates partnerships between the local economy and rural institutions, contributing to a strong regional economy.

The Regional Talent Development Initiative Grant Program, now called Opportunity Now, promotes alignment between high schools, higher education institutions, and the workforce through grant funding that creates transformational workforce change in the area. Higher education institutions are able to apply for this grant, furthering their ability to promote positive change in the region.

Additionally, ARRC recommends that current workforce programs, such as AmeriCorps, be altered to create closer relationships with Rural-Serving Institutions, ultimately promoting AmeriCorps engagement from students attending Rural-Serving Institutions. Colorado currently has the College Renaissance Corps which partners with two community colleges in Denver and this program could be expanded to include rural community colleges. The state also has AmeriCorps members in rural Colorado. Finally, there is an opportunity for Colorado to support its Native student population more comprehensively than solely through the Denver Indian Center’s programs. Though Colorado does not have any federally-designated Tribal Colleges or Universities, Fort Lewis College is a federally designated Native American-Serving Non-Tribal Institution with 27% of their study body identifying as Native; it is also a Rural-Serving Institution making it a prime candidate for a workforce development program that supports Native students in the region.

Though Colorado economic and workforce development programs are strong, there are few supportive initiatives regarding Rural-Serving Institutions and educational attainment. This should be a state priority, considering the goal to educate more in-state residents to address the Colorado Paradox. ARRC recommends Pell Grants are increased for rural students, childcare is provided for rural students, grants are available for teachers in rural regions, and the minority-serving institution enrollment threshold is lowered for Rural-Serving Institutions. Out of these recommendations, Colorado has only implemented one: TEACH grants for rural teachers through the state's Rural School District Teaching Fellowship Program. Colorado does not have authority over the Pell Grant or a Minority-Serving Institution designation, though they can advocate for federal changes regarding these two recommendations. That being said, Colorado can and should implement additional policy that supports educational attainment through Rural-Serving Institutions, considering these institutions educate a high number of in-state residents. Further, Rural-Serving Institutions have the ability to grow into rural anchor institutions that provide additional health, cultural, and civic benefits to students and rural regions.

Rural-Serving Institutions can also support infrastructure growth in rural areas. The federal Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge and the Community Facilities Program should be implemented at a state level and adapted so that Colorado’s Rural-Serving Institutions
can get the support needed to partner with the state in the technical development of communities.\textsuperscript{54} Finally, Colorado should adopt the Rural-Serving Institution designation created by ARRC.\textsuperscript{55} This recommendation will be discussed in detail in recommendation number two below.

This audit identifies many areas where Colorado can improve its support of Rural-Serving Institutions. Given these Rural-Serving Institutions are in a strong position to become rural anchor institutions and impact a significant portion of Colorado residents through promoting both workforce development, civic engagement, and regional prosperity, Colorado should invest in creating policy that is supportive. Many Rural-Serving Institutions are already doing these things; they deserve to be recognized and rewarded for their contribution to educating Coloradans and working towards thriving communities.

**RECOMMENDATION 2**

**Adopt the Rural-Serving Institution designation, created by ARRC, in Colorado.**

The first step towards supporting the promotion of rural anchor institutions is to adopt the Rural-Serving Institution designation created by ARRC.\textsuperscript{56} This designation allows for Rural-Serving Institutions to be easily identified and promoted through supportive policy. The designation will function similarly to the Hispanic-Serving Institution designation in Colorado through colleges being recognized for serving a large percentage of rural students; additionally, these colleges will be identified through their regional partnerships and initiatives. Colorado can use the Rural-Serving Institution map on ARRC’s website for easy identification of these institutions in Colorado.\textsuperscript{57}

This map identifies all of the Rural-Serving Institutions in the country. Additionally, similarly to Hispanic-Serving Institutions, there will be a page on the Colorado Department of Higher Education website that lists all of the Rural-Serving Institutions in Colorado and they will be discussed within the state context of higher education more explicitly and holistically.\textsuperscript{58} To adequately support these rural institutions, Colorado needs to create grants that colleges can receive to support their rural students or rural community. These grants should not be limited to initiatives that focus on economic development; they should encompass infrastructure development, healthcare initiatives, cultural programs, and civic engagement opportunities as well to align with addressing the expanded Colorado Paradox. The grants can be modeled off of the Hispanic-Serving Institution grants from the federal government.\textsuperscript{59} By focusing on all of the benefits of education, not just the economic outcomes, it becomes clear that higher education can play a large role in promoting a flourishing Colorado. Rural-Serving Institutions are an important piece to this puzzle and deserve to be recognized for their holistic mission and contribution to state education.
CALL TO ACTION

Colorado needs to recognize the importance of Rural-Serving Institutions within higher education in Colorado. These institutions provide educational access to a large portion of Coloradans, contribute to successful rural regions, and will be leaders in addressing the expanded Colorado Paradox if supported properly. The current neoliberal perspective on higher education will not solve the issue and Colorado must deeply examine state priorities if change is to be made. ARRC’s federal policy recommendations for the creation of rural anchor institutions will benefit all Coloradans through a holistic view of education leading to a stronger economy, a more engaged citizen base, and a healthier population. A thriving, equitable, and economically sound Colorado is within reach.
ENDNOTES


04 Ibid.


07 Ibid.


17 Ibid.


Ibid


Ibid

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

57 Ibid.


REFERENCES


