



# ACCELERATING OPPORTUNITY IN RURAL REGIONS:

## Designing Pathway Programs for Adults and Other Non-Traditional Learners

There are 594 publicly and tribally controlled rural community college districts in the United States. These districts encompass more than 64 percent of all community colleges and serve 3.4 million students.<sup>1</sup> Career and guided pathway programs offered by community colleges provide both traditional and non-traditional learners with easy-to-navigate credential and degree programs for in-demand jobs throughout their regions. However, programs designed by rural community colleges to meet the needs of adult learners should take into consideration the unique challenges and opportunities that exist in these regions.

For generations, rural regions were defined by their economic drivers. This is why terms such as “coal country” and “steel country” exist today. The dignity tied to hard work and employment in these regions is a powerful motivator for unemployed and dislocated workers. However, as industry and technologies evolve, many rural workers find themselves needing to retrain or upskill to find good jobs in their hometowns. Community colleges in these regions are proud of the deep-



**BUILDING A  
FUTURE  
THAT WORKS.**

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rooted relationships established with their local employers because they understand that students often view their employer as part of their core identity. Subsequently, rural colleges find that they have a unique advantage in building career and guided pathways because the collaborative employers partnerships—so critical to effective program design—are already well established.

While rural community colleges may find that they have minimal competition from other educational providers, they also acknowledge that the onus often lies solely on them to find innovative ways to anticipate and respond to the evolving, and often niche, workforce needs of the companies that support regional economies. A core part of this responsibility includes partnering with workforce organizations, adult basic education, and a variety of other community-based organizations to provide adults and non-traditional learners with supportive, streamlined, educational pathways toward family-sustaining jobs.

Well-designed, flexible pathways are particularly important in rural regions because these areas often do not provide access to several of the social, environmental, and technological amenities that exist in suburban and urban areas.

## About Accelerating Opportunity

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Traditional training offered by colleges and workforce programs is rarely aligned to employer needs, leaving many adults with bleak prospects for long-term career development. Equipping people with basic and technical skills leads to financial security and advancement in today's new economy.

Accelerating Opportunity (AO) was a multi-year community college reform initiative developed and managed by JFF. AO focused on changes in policy, programs, and systems that would enable low-skilled adults to successfully advance from adult basic education to technical pathways in high-demand fields. Through AO, over 85 community colleges in 7 states built pathways that accelerated students to attain high-demand credentials by integrating basic skills instruction and technical education. JFF provided technical assistance and coaching tailored to states' implementation plans.

AO is a tested model with over 10,700 students earning 12,509 credentials and more than 96,000 college credits across 4 states. AO also increased the probability of earning a credential over the non-AO comparison student group by 19 percent in Kansas, 30 percent in Illinois, 133 percent in Kentucky, and 622 percent in Louisiana.

These include reliable public transportation, high-speed internet and cellular coverage, and safety-net resources such as food pantries, overnight shelters, and drop-in childcare centers. Community college leaders in Kansas and Kentucky, who were early adopters of the Accelerating Opportunity (AO) model (see sidebar), have expanded the team teaching, supplemental instruction, and supportive services elements of AO to serve all learners, not just those in adult basic education programs. This includes low-skilled learners and young adults in career and technical education (CTE) programs. This initiative, Accelerating CTE, is funded by the ECMC Foundation and is an expansion of AO. Accelerating CTE seeks to address CTE students of all ages that have not completed a career or education program and lack adequate preparation for college-level coursework.

**“Meeting workforce demand is critical because when an employer shuts down in a rural region, it isn’t a blip on the radar. It has a huge impact on the economy.”**

—Interviewee

Early learning from Accelerating CTE prompted JFF researchers to cast a wider net to explore the challenges that rural community colleges all across the country

are facing when trying to recruit and retain adults and non-traditional students into education and training programs. Drawing from TAACCCT and the AACC Pathways Project, JFF engaged nine colleges from eight states in semi-structured phone interviews.<sup>2,3</sup> Interviewees were asked to talk about the role their college plays in helping to support and grow the regional economy. In addition, the interviews focused on common academic and non-academic barriers for adult learners, strategies for marketing programs to adults, promising partnership models, and what’s next for the interviewees’ colleges as they continue to implement and scale career pathways.

Although the challenges and responses outlined on the following pages are not exclusive to career and guided pathway programs, it is the hope of JFF that the practical strategies presented in this brief will help rural community colleges design and implement career and guided pathway programs for adults that: a) leverage the unique resources and opportunities that exist across rural regions; b) acknowledge the very real challenges experienced by non-traditional learners; and c) maximize partnership resources and networks to scale impact.

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL ECONOMIES: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community colleges are pivotal to the strength of rural economies. A 30-year study of more than 2,000 community colleges in 44 states found that rural counties with established community colleges experienced significantly more job growth than those without one.<sup>4</sup> Colleges play a variety of important roles, ranging from small-business

incubators to workforce training facilities to steppingstones for students intent on eventually earning a bachelor's degree. Interviews revealed that while there are many key functions of rural community colleges, perhaps the most important is meeting the workforce demands of regional businesses. This often requires finding human capital and training equipment to meet one-time, niche needs of companies moving into the area. Administrators explain that while this can be costly and challenging, the college has

### Supporting Business Growth and Development Through Intentional Design

There are a variety of ways for community colleges to take a highly engaged, proactive role in supporting and elevating workforce and economic development in their regions:

- 1. Co-locating critical services.** Adopting a one-stop-shop approach to service delivery may not be cheap or easy to achieve. However, as job seekers, small business owners, and entrepreneurs seek out training, resources, and opportunities to achieve their goals, this design simplifies an often confusing and overwhelming process.
- 2. Mobilizing training and supports.** The distance between employers and colleges in rural regions creates a challenging barrier. Finding ways to mobilize or leverage existing training labs or classroom space can mitigate the time and travel required for busy adults.
- 3. Dedicating staff and resources.** The resources required to effectively build sustainable career pathways for adults and other nontraditional learners are substantial. This work requires a team of staff committed to instituting equitable, inclusive solutions and pedagogy.
- 4. Organizing, facilitating, accelerating.** Community colleges are often well positioned to assist in organizing, facilitating, or accelerating regional workforce and economic development initiatives through financial support or in-kind contributions. They can also act as a catalyst to move community partners toward a shared objective.

a responsibility to ensure that businesses have access to the skilled workers they need to plant their roots within the local economy for years to come.

Rural community colleges help connect small local businesses and entrepreneurs to resources, supports, and training opportunities that can help them launch and grow their ventures. College administrators that JFF spoke with emphasized the importance of ensuring that these services are easily and readily available to people in the community and that they feel supported and nurtured by the college throughout their startup journey.

Finally, providing high-quality, equitable educational experiences at an affordable price is another critical function of rural community colleges. This is particularly important given the high concentration of poverty that permeates rural regions across the country.

Pathway programs designed around low-income, working adults and dislocated workers, many of whom may be first-generation college-goers, create hope and a path to self-sufficiency that is difficult to achieve otherwise.



## SUPPORTING THE NON-ACADEMIC NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS IN TODAY'S COLLEGE SETTING

Low-income adults, dislocated workers, and other non-traditional learners often face a unique set of circumstances upon entry into college programs. The challenge of balancing the demands of their personal lives with the demands of their coursework can feel overwhelming. Many non-traditional learners have children or parents they care for and are working full or part time in low-wage, low-skilled jobs. Adding to this, most are eligible for financial aid only if they are taking six or more credits. Students enrolled in non-credit classes that fall outside approved programs of study are not eligible for aid at all. Rural community college students face an additional set of struggles that include things such as a lack of low-cost public transportation, high fuel prices, and spotty broadband and/or cellular service.

Across the country, rural community colleges are finding innovative ways to address many of these challenges and make non-traditional students feel more at ease in their learning environments.

**“Many adult students enter this experience without an advocate or support system of any kind. Convincing them that they belong here and can be successful is a huge challenge.”**

—College Administrator



## NON-ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

## COLLEGE RESPONSES

Students lack confidence in their ability to be successful and a supportive network to keep them focused and on track.

Pair students with coaches or mentors who provide the advocacy and encouragement these students need to feel supported and welcome in a college setting.

Minimize the ways in which adults and other non-traditional students are identified or set apart from traditional students.

Unplanned events can permanently derail a student's progress (e.g., vehicle or home repairs, loss of childcare, food insecurity).

Establish an emergency fund for things like bagged lunches, gas cards, or low-cost, on-site childcare to support students and keep them on track as these intermittent crises arise.

Students have difficulty balancing the demands of family/work with the demands of college.

Reduce the number of days students need to be on campus each week by scheduling courses in blocks of two or three on weekends and evenings.

Co-locate wraparound service providers such as Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) coordinators, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and adult basic education on campus so they are easily accessed by students.

Students lack many of the skills and knowledge needed to navigate today's college setting.

Design programs and services with equity in mind based on regional demographics.

Develop first-semester training seminars for basic skills critical to college success.

The distance between homes or places of business and the nearest community college is significant.

Utilize off-site training facilities to decrease the distance gap.

Employ technologies like videoconferencing and virtual learning labs that enable students to gain technological skills for their next job.

It's difficult to convince dislocated workers that they must retrain for new jobs because their old jobs no longer exist in the region.

Review labor market data with students to draw their attention to the regional industries with job growth and good wages that may be viable options for their existing skill sets.

Students, particularly those that are younger, have unrealistic goals and expectations of jobs and wages within the region.

Expose students to labor market data early in their college experience. This allows them to consider all of the viable career options based on regional dynamics and their interests.

## SUPPORTING THE ACADEMIC NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS IN TODAY'S COLLEGE SETTING

Recognizing and addressing the academic challenges that adult learners face is just as important as addressing the non-academic challenges. Underpreparedness has been identified as one key issue facing rural students as they pursue postsecondary education.<sup>5</sup> Although many underprepared learners enroll in remedial courses to bring them up to speed, research has indicated that traditional remediation strategies may not increase student success.<sup>6</sup> Identifying academic struggles early is critical so that students can get the supports they need immediately and do not fall behind to that point that they are unable to catch up.

One interviewee discussed the need to emphasize to adult learners that academic success requires a significant commitment and should be approached similar to a day-to-day job, with dedicated time set aside each day to focus on studying and completing assignments.

Another participant offered that she takes an incremental approach to helping adult learners develop stronger writing skills by having the students maintain a journal that highlights what they learned in class that week. Many colleges echoed this and offered additional examples of academic barriers and strategies found on the next page:



## ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

## COLLEGE RESPONSES

Students are generally not prepared in terms of the skills and rigor that a college setting requires.

Implement “success coaches” to assist students in navigating academic requirements.

Establish a dedicated advising center to help students understand how coursework aligns to their career plan.

Ensure after-hours support to accommodate working adults.

Institute an early alert process that urges instructors to inform success coaches if a student is struggling to keep up.

Many students are returning to an academic setting after a decade or more in the workforce

Enlist tutors to train students in utilizing technologies or online learning platforms such as Blackboard.

Require a first-year seminar to introduce students to skills they will need to be successful.

Establish a Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) program to reduce the number of courses students must take to earn a credential or degree.

Students feel that they don’t fit in with classmates and lack confidence in their ability to succeed academically.

Establish success coaches or mentors as advocates for students that feel overwhelmed and insecure.

Use positive reinforcement/recognition strategies such as badges, certificates, or fun activities.

Develop cohort models that promote shared learnings across a group of individuals throughout the duration of a course or program.

Students lack college-level math and English preparedness.

Design co-requisite/co-enrollment models in developmental education and college classes paired with wraparound support services.

Prepare contextualized lessons so that the connection between course competencies and on-the-job skills needed for employment are clearly demonstrated.

Students have uncertainty and confusion about the academic journey they will need to take to achieve their goals.

Cap the number of credits required for degree completion.

Create pathway frameworks or “meta-majors” to take the guesswork out of selecting and sequencing courses.

Plan two-year programs over a span of three years to allow students a longer period to complete and receive wraparound supports.

# CLOSER LOOK

## Examining the Impact of Coaches, Mentors, and Navigators

Programs that pair students (both traditional and non-traditional) with supportive personnel upon entry into college pathways are gaining a lot of attention and momentum across the country. Though these individuals are referred to by different names (success coaches, college navigators, peer mentors, etc.), they all share similar roles and responsibilities in helping to ensure that students feel welcome, supported, and informed as their college experience unfolds. This role is particularly important for adults and other nontraditional students, who often face greater academic and non-academic barriers to completion.

### Non-Academic Services and Supports Offered:

- Advocacy and encouragement
- Financial aid guidance
- Career and labor market exploration
- Information on programs such as food and housing assistance, transportation, and healthcare
- Résumé writing and interviewing skills

### Academic Services and Supports Offered:

- Tutoring and study tactics
- Early identification of learning disabilities and advocacy in addressing with instructors
- Exploration of alternative means of assessing competencies
- Encouragement, reinforcement, recognition, and confidence building

## College Administrators on the Impact of Coaches, Mentors, and Navigators

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There’s so much pressure on adults entering college for the first time or for the first time in many years, particularly low-income adults. They feel as if there is no margin for error. Success coaches help take some of the guesswork out of being a college student and ease the psychological fears.

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For most nontraditional students, this is their first college experience. They lack an advocate—someone to support and encourage them. They often feel overwhelmed and have difficulty adjusting. Coaches guide them along the way and help get them back on track when they begin to veer off course.

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At first, faculty were apprehensive about a co-requisite model. They felt having students in their classes that did not pass assessments may bring their course performance down. But now, they see the positive impact that success coaches have on students that sit in their classes, and their course completions are actually higher than before.

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## OVERCOMING ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES IN RURAL REGIONS

Many of the organizational challenges of designing and implementing career pathways in rural regions are similar to those experienced by suburban and urban colleges. Developing an effective career pathway framework requires not just organizational and structural change, but also cultural change, which is often messy and slow to occur. One administrator JFF spoke with noted that rural community college cultures are often very tight-knit with a tendency to avoid conflict due to the close relationships among faculty and administrators.

**“We don’t just work with these folks; we may live on the same street or attend the same church.”**

—College Administrator

Therefore, innovations and solutions that are considered disruptive can be met with apprehension and resistance. However, multiple interviewees felt that working as a team to navigate the tensions that come with creating career and guided pathways have resulted in a much more unified and transparent college culture.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

## COLLEGE RESPONSES

Processes, procedures, and programs are not equitable for working adults, English language learners, and other non-traditional students served.

Commit to adopting a more inclusive pedagogy focused on equity and creating a sense of belonging for all students.

Create learning communities for faculty to learn from one another and share their experiences in implementing efforts focused on equity.

Creating additional capacity for pathway courses led to the elimination of less popular courses that have been around for years and did not align with a specific program of study.

Adopt a data-driven approach to program evaluation that prioritizes programs that prepare students for in-demand jobs that pay well and offer opportunities for advancement, and acknowledge that this may lead to the elimination of certain legacy courses.

It is difficult to recruit qualified and motivated faculty, specifically those who are familiar with the core components of career pathways and student success.

Benchmark wages to try to align faculty salaries to what instructors would earn in the field.

Examine the college's status quo hiring standards and make adjustments where possible and appropriate, being careful not to compromise the quality of instruction.

It is challenging to manage communication and expectations across college departments while implementing pathways.

Employ user-friendly communication technologies and learning communities that enable departments to share their concerns and success stories.

Creating greater awareness of what career pathways are and how they can benefit students and employers, and then getting people on board, has been difficult.

Prioritize consistency and repetition when talking about career and guided pathways.

Document successful approaches, culture shifts, and/or outcomes, and share them college-wide.

Designing pathways that work for non-traditional students that may have already completed several courses or have received credit for prior learning is a struggle.

Map pathway course competencies to credit given for prior learning or course completion.

Ensure that evening and weekend courses are offered in addition to traditional Monday-through-Friday daytime offerings.

## **RECRUITING NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS INTO CAREER PATHWAYS**

Many of the colleges JFF spoke with indicated that the vast majority of their current student body is made up of traditional students between the ages of 18 and 25. However, this is primarily due to the strength of local economies and low unemployment rates across the country. During a recession, when unemployment is higher, colleges shift marketing efforts to specifically target adults and dislocated workers. Colleges offered several innovative tactics that they feel have, in the past, helped boost the enrollment rates of non-traditional students:

### ***Enlisting Prominent Employer Partners***

The identity of rural communities is often rooted in industry. People are proud to say they work for an employer that meaningfully contributes to economic vitality, pays well, and has a good reputation. Recruiting these types of employers to sponsor or endorse college programs drives potential students to pursue postsecondary options as a means of one day working for one of the region's economic anchors. Partnering with employers to provide workers with on-site demonstrations or information about courses can help in recruiting incumbent workers looking to upgrade their skills.

### ***Promoting Programs Using Everyday Touch Points***

Colleges highlighted the importance of utilizing places and things that adults come in contact with every day as a means of recruiting non-traditional learners. Colleges place banners at gas pumps, print ads on grocery bags, place stickers on pizza boxes, and even partner with hospitals to provide newborn babies with college-savings piggy banks bearing the college logo, in an attempt to market to the next generation of college-goers.

### ***Establishing The College As A Place of Gathering For The Community***

Ensure that members of the community know that the college is a space in which all residents are welcome—where people of all ages can engage in learning experiences to enrich their personal and professional lives. This includes holding open houses and tours of campus facilities; hosting community events such as festivals, STEM camps, or fundraisers; or providing meeting space for organizational retreats or conferences.

### ***Consistently and Ubiquitously Using A Pathway Brand***

A major challenge of recruiting and retaining non-traditional learners in pathway programs lies in simplifying the process of exploring college offerings. Colleges stated that developing a simple but eye-catching brand for pathway

programs and marketing the brand everywhere possible throughout the region has resulted in a more streamlined, consistent approach to marketing and broader awareness of programs of study offered at the college.

## **FORGING STRONG PARTNERSHIPS TO PROMOTE EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**

All interviewees JFF spoke with emphasized that strong community partnerships lie at the core of their ability to support and grow the regional workforce and economy. Community colleges cannot do this alone. The involvement of small and large businesses, chambers of commerce, local nonprofit organizations, K-12 schools, state and local legislators, and others is pivotal to providing the supportive services that so many low-income adults need to be successful. Partnerships with industry are often very strong in rural areas given the role the colleges play in meeting skill and workforce training needs. Many of the partnerships discussed in JFF's interviews focused on work-based learning opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, and earn-and-learn initiatives, which often guarantee jobs to program graduates. Others focused on providing last-dollar scholarships for those in need and working with local businesses on marketing and recruitment efforts.

Colleges offered the following tips and suggestions for creating or strengthening partnership efforts:

### ***Create A One-Stop-Shop Supportive Service Center on Campus***

Housing a support center on campus provides non-traditional learners with easy access to informed representatives of agencies administering programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. This approach eliminates the need for students—who may already be feeling overwhelmed—to travel to multiple office locations for information or services. It also demonstrates a commitment to partnering with other agencies and organizations to provide more streamlined, comprehensive services to those most in need. Additional supports to consider include things like food pantries, affordable housing assistance, and after-hours, low-cost childcare services.

### ***Engage Industry Beyond Program Advisory Committees***

Employer involvement in curriculum development is critical. All colleges we spoke to engage their industry partners through active program advisory committees. However, many are also actively recruiting employers to lead or support work-based learning initiatives,

assist students in conceptualizing capstone projects, hosting job-site or facility tours and job fairs, and engaging students in mock interviews. This deeper level of employer involvement creates a win-win-win situation for colleges, employers, and students.

### ***Approach Partnerships As Ever Evolving and Adapt As Needed***

Successful partnerships can be challenging to get off the ground. However, colleges emphasized that as technologies, students, and workforce needs change, colleges must be ready to respond with innovative, reimagined partnerships that elevate and promote the unique attributes of the regions they serve. A few examples include:

**Skagit Valley College**—The rapid growth of the Latino/a student population in the Mount Vernon and Burlington-Edison school districts prompted a need for more bilingual/bicultural Latino/a teachers in northwest Washington state. In response, local high schools, Skagit Valley College (SVC), and Western Washington University (WWU) partnered to launch the [Maestros para el Pueblo](#) program. This program encourages and supports Latino/a students to fulfill their educational goals of earning a teaching degree. The seamless college pathway provides financial assistance as well as dedicated, one-on-one advisors as students pursue either an Early Childhood Education Certificate at SVC or a teaching certification at WWU.

### **Mitchell Technical Institute—**

Understanding that some students may wish to pursue college-level sports prompted Mitchell Technical Institute (MTI) in South Dakota to partner with local four-year university Dakota Wesleyan University (DWU) to offer students the opportunity to complete their technical skill courses at MTI while earning their general education credits at DWU. This enables students to participate in university sports programs not offered by MTI.

### **Wallace State Community College—**

Given that tourism is a leading economic driver in and around Hanceville, Alabama, Wallace State Community College often partners with its local Parks and Recreation Department to sponsor and support local redevelopment efforts that aim to draw more people to the area.



## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The nation is experiencing a period of low unemployment, and colleges admit to dedicating fewer resources to recruiting adults and other non-traditional learners while the economy is strong. However, advancements in technology are underscoring the importance of incumbent worker upskilling and retraining. Now is the ideal time for colleges to focus on how to build or strengthen the systems, supports, and networks necessary to effectively prepare low-income and vulnerable populations with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills needed to find and retain good jobs in today's competitive markets.

**“We cannot allow a lack of resources and funding to serve as an excuse for not meeting the needs of our students and businesses. There are always ways to figure it out through grant opportunities and innovative regional partnerships.”**

—College Administrator

Career pathway programs designed around the unique needs of rural industries as well as those of low-income adults and other non-traditional learners provide not only a pipeline of skilled workers to fill in-demand jobs, but also hope and opportunity for a subset of the workforce that find the odds stacked against them. This report demonstrates that the mission of rural community colleges is not just to provide local talent with the education and training needed to meet the workforce needs of regional businesses. They also strive to be a source of inspiration, motivation, and exploration for a population of adult learners that keep rural America thriving.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the faculty and administrators from the following community colleges who took time to speak with us and provide their valuable insights to the development of this report:

- ▶ Cleveland State Community College, Cleveland, Tennessee
- ▶ Hutchinson Community College, Hutchinson, Kansas
- ▶ Mitchell Technical Institute, Mitchell, South Dakota
- ▶ Neosho County Community College, Neosho, Kansas
- ▶ Skagit Valley College, Mt. Vernon, Washington
- ▶ Wallace State Community College, Hanceville, Alabama
- ▶ West Virginia Community & Technical College System Chancellor's Office
- ▶ West Kentucky Community & Technical College, Paducah, Kentucky
- ▶ Williston State College, Williston, North Dakota

We would also like to acknowledge and thank the following JFF staff: Jenny Freeman for her assistance in identifying rural TAACCCT-funded colleges for us to interview, Barbara Endel and Rachel McDonnell for their guidance and leadership throughout development of the report, and our communications team for editing and graphic design.

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## ENDNOTES

1. “Fast Facts,” Rural Community College Alliance, <http://ruralccalliance.org>.
2. The Trade Adjustment Assistance and Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) grant initiative provided community colleges with grant funding to accelerate and innovate their workforce development programs for job-driven skills. Funding was distributed in four rounds to colleges in all 50 states between 2011 and 2014.
3. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) recently launched a national project focused on building capacity for community colleges to design and implement structured academic and career pathways at scale, for all of their students.
4. Andrew Crookston and Gregory Hooks, “Community Colleges, Budget Cuts, and Jobs.” *Sociology of Education*, 85, No. 4 (May 30, 2012).
5. Susan Elkins, “Overcoming Four Key Challenges to Rural Student Postsecondary Success,” *The EvoLLution*, August 18, 2014, <https://evollution.com/opinions/overcoming-key-challenges-rural-student-postsecondary-success/>.
6. Chenoa S. Woods, Toby Park, Shouping Hu, and Tamara Bertrand Jones, “Reading, Writing, and English Course Pathways when Development Education Is Optional: Course Enrollment and Success for Underprepared First-time-in-College Students,” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 43:1, 5-25 (November 10, 2017), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10668926.2017.1391144?needAccess=true>.



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