



Introducing Our Nation's Rural-Serving Postsecondary Institutions Moving Toward Greater Visibility and Appreciation

**Report Prepared by the
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rural communities have gained greater attention in policymaking, journalism, and public discourse after years of relative obscurity. Regarding postsecondary education, it has become increasingly clear that rural-serving institutions (RSIs) play vital roles in supporting educational opportunity, social development, and well-being of rural communities. A challenge in advancing understanding about RSIs has been the lack of a formal framework for identifying them. This project developed an evidence-based metric for identifying RSIs that serve rural students and communities.

KEY FINDINGS

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1

RSIs span postsecondary types. The report identifies 1,087 RSIs including 33% of all private, four-year institutions, 46% of all public, four-year institutions, and more than half of all public, two-year colleges. Roughly one-third of Historically Black Colleges and Universities are RSIs, as are 18% of High Hispanic-enrolling institutions, 93% of Tribal Colleges and Universities, and 94% of High Native-enrolling (nontribal) institutions.

KEY FINDING

2

RSIs serve communities facing socioeconomic disparities. Of the postsecondary institutions located in low employment counties, 83% are RSIs. More than two-thirds of the institutions located in persistent poverty counties are RSIs, as are 53% of institutions in persistent child-poverty counties.

KEY FINDING

3

Enrollments at RSIs are smaller but diverse. RSIs have smaller average enrollments in terms of headcount and full-time equivalent students, and they tend to focus on undergraduate education. RSIs enroll a greater share of low-income students who receive Pell Grants, as well as a higher percentage of Native American/Alaska Native students.

KEY FINDING

4

RSIs are reliant on state appropriations. Public RSIs receive a greater share of their revenues from state appropriations than non-RSIs. With the exception of private, four-year institutions, endowment assets per student are higher at RSIs

APPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

APPLICATION

1

Applications for Research. Scholars can use the metric to conduct qualitative and quantitative research about RSIs and the students and communities they serve.

APPLICATION

2

Applications for Policy. As we gain better knowledge about RSIs, it will also become important to develop policies and funding models that are supportive of these institutions. The current project provides policymakers with data and tools to identify RSIs and legislate for them.

APPLICATION

3

Applications for Practice. RSI leaders may use the metric to create true institutional peer groups for the purposes of benchmarking, strategic planning, and continuous improvement.

APPLICATION

4

Applications for Philanthropy. The ability to identify RSIs can help inform donations and grantmakers interested in supporting RSIs and the students and communities they serve.

CONCLUSION

RSIs are irreplaceable rural infrastructure whose existence directly or indirectly affects millions of people. Their importance has been underscored through the COVID-19 pandemic, when these institutions worked to continue educating students remotely in spite of inequality in broadband internet access. Equipped with an evidence-based framework for identifying RSIs, the responsibility for their well-being, and that of the communities they serve, falls to all of us.