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ARRC Launches Metric for Identifying Rural-Serving Colleges and Universities

New Method Promotes Support for Underserved Communities

Boone, NC - Groundbreaking research from the [Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC)](#) has created a first-of-its kind metric to identify rural-serving institutions (RSIs), making it easier to support the educational and economic vitality of rural communities.

Based on a year-long study of postsecondary education in rural communities, the new RSI metric has allowed researchers to identify over 1,000 RSIs, educating nearly five million students. That amounts to 46% of all public, four-year institutions and more than half of all public, two-year colleges, indicating the significant contributions of these colleges and universities to enrollment and degree completion. ARRC's five-factor RSI metric makes it possible to develop a comprehensive list of

institutions that aren't just rural-located, but also rural-serving.

The first report using the metric, "Introducing Our Nation's Rural-Serving Postsecondary Institutions," provides new insights on these schools, as well as the students and the communities they serve. In almost every sector, the study found 35% or more of the RSI student body are people of color, upending persistent myths conflating "rural" and "white." The study also reveals roughly one-third of HBCUs to be RSIs, as are 18% of High Hispanic-enrolling institutions, 93% of Tribal Colleges and Universities, and 94% of High Native-enrolling (nontribal) institutions. These findings emphasize the important role RSIs play in providing college access to marginalized populations.

"RSIs are important educational access points for low-income students, adult learners, and those from marginalized racial backgrounds, and they are critical to regional economic development, as many RSIs are the largest employer in their region. These institutions have deep connections to their communities, and this project will help those stories to be told," said **Andrew Koricich, the project's principal investigator and ARRC's executive director**.

With support from [Ascendium Education Group](#), the research additionally found a disproportionate number of economically-distressed counties are home to RSIs, with RSIs comprising 83% of postsecondary institutions located in low employment counties and more than two-thirds of postsecondary institutions located in persistent poverty counties. These findings underscore the role of RSIs as critical assets in rural communities, which policymakers can strengthen and leverage through targeted grants and other programs.

According to **Kristin Hultquist of HCM Strategists**, "In my 25-year career in public policy, I know that what gets measured gets done. The economic vitality of our nation's rural communities requires attention to the talent-creating colleges and universities serving them. ARRC's new research to define a rural-serving institution has critical implications for how the federal government and states identify and support learners living in rural communities."

Additionally, leaders at RSIs can use the metric, which considers population and location measures alongside degree fields, to create institutional peer groups for the purposes of benchmarking, strategic planning, and continuous improvement. The metric and accompanying research can also be of value to philanthropic organizations.

"Not only will policymakers and institutions benefit from ARRC's RSI metric, but it also increases Ascendium's own understanding of the rural postsecondary education landscape and the institutions that are supporting rural learners and communities," said **Kirstin Yeado, program officer at Ascendium**. "The report and interactive map are foundational tools that will enable future rural postsecondary education research and help philanthropic organizations like Ascendium target investments that impact the success of rural learners from low-income backgrounds."

ARRC is making the RSI metric, data file, first report, interactive map, and data documentation freely available on its website. It plans to release additional reports and host several webinars in the coming months. The research team hopes this will enable other scholars to conduct qualitative and quantitative studies about RSIs.

Link to Executive Summary | Link to Full Report |Link to Interactive Map

Andrew Koricich is an associate professor of higher education at Appalachian State University and the executive director of the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges. **Vanessa A. Sansone** is an assistant professor of higher education at The University of Texas at San Antonio. **Alisa Hicklin Fryar** is a professor of political science at the University of Oklahoma. **Cecilia M. Orphan** is an associate professor of higher education at the University of Denver. **Kevin R. McClure** is an associate professor of higher education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges is a research collaborative and resource hub with the mission of increasing appreciation for and understanding of regional colleges and their contributions to opportunity and community wellbeing.

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