

The Foundation Review

Volume 12
Issue 3 *Postsecondary Education Attainment -- Free Access*

9-2020

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Recommended Citation

Pennington, A. (2020). Partnering for Postsecondary Success in Rural Texas. *The Foundation Review*, 12(3). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1533>

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Partnering for Postsecondary Success in Rural Texas

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Keywords: Rural, grantmaking, capacity building, collaboration

Introduction

Nearly 700,000 students attend schools in rural regions of Texas¹ (Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, & Klein, 2019). These areas are abundant in natural resources and diverse in population, and they are good places to make a home: 79% of rural Texas residents rate the quality of life in their community as good or excellent (Strategic Research Associates, 2018). Across the nation and within Texas, rural students match or outperform their peers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the eighth grade and graduate from high school at high rates (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015).

Despite these strengths, young people who live in rural areas are significantly less likely to participate in postsecondary education. Nationally, about 42% of people ages 18–24 are enrolled in a college or university, but within rural communities the participation rate is only 29% (NCES, 2015). Among those who do enroll, only 42% graduate within six years (National Student Clearing House Research Center [NSCRC], 2018). Although this is comparable to the completion rate for urban students, when combined with low college-going rates the result is significantly lower educational attainment in rural regions overall. About 41% of people in urban areas hold at least an associate degree, as compared to 28% of people in rural areas (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2017).

Key Points

- Although students living in rural areas perform academically on par with their peers, they are less likely to complete a postsecondary credential due to geographic, economic, and other barriers. Greater Texas Foundation, a private grantmaker focused on postsecondary student success in Texas, fosters rural collaborations as part of its philanthropic strategy.
- This article reflects on lessons learned by foundation staff from this strand of work. It describes innovative models for postsecondary support developed by the foundation's rural partners, discusses the need to balance direct program support and capacity building, and emphasizes the importance of visiting rural communities in person.
- To conclude, the article suggests several ways funders can deepen their engagement with the rural communities they serve.

Several factors can make it difficult for rural students to earn a certificate or degree. The small size of some school districts can create a close-knit community but can also make it difficult to provide resources that help prepare students for college. About 23% of rural students take dual enrollment courses² — a rate significantly higher than the national average — but only 10% of rural students pass Advanced Placement (AP) courses, compared with 19% of high school

¹ Definitions of "rural" vary widely. The estimate offered here represents the number of students enrolled in Texas school districts classified by the National Center for Education Statistics as rural fringe, rural distant, or rural remote. Essentially, this definition includes communities of fewer than 2,500 residents that are at least five miles away from an urbanized area or at least 2.5 miles from an urbanized cluster. See https://nces.ed.gov/programs/handbook/data/pdf/appendix_d.pdf and <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>.

² Dual-enrollment courses allow high school students to take coursework from postsecondary institutions for college credit.

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students overall (Showalter et al., 2019). Some rural districts can offer only a small number of upper-level math and science courses because they don't have enough teachers and students to form the classes. And regardless of subject area, opportunities for professional development and collaboration are often lacking for teachers in isolated areas (Hott, 2018).

Physical distance from institutions of higher education makes it harder for students to visit in person and imagine life on a college campus, and it means those who do choose to pursue a credential often must leave home to do so. About 5.4 million people in the United States live more than a 45-minute drive away from any institution of higher education, and most of these individuals live in rural areas (Beamer & Steinbaum, 2019). And, although rural economies vary widely, students in some communities have limited exposure to careers that require postsecondary education and to mentors or school-based advisors who can guide them to and through those career pathways. Finally, the high cost of attending college, which includes not only tuition and fees but also living expenses and deferred income, is a barrier for many students, and those in rural areas are no exception: Nearly one in six rural K–12 students live below the poverty line (Showalter et al., 2019).

Since 2014, Greater Texas Foundation (GTF) has worked to improve postsecondary access and completion for rural Texas students. As a private funder whose overarching mission is to promote postsecondary success across the state, with a particular focus on underserved and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, we recognize that to increase the number of Texans who hold a certificate or an associate or baccalaureate degree, we must include the many young people who live in rural areas of the state.

To that end, as one part of our philanthropic strategy we fund efforts to foster rural student success. Between 2014 and 2019, our board approved \$4.9 million in grants to entities seeking to develop, test, and scale innovative postsecondary pathways and systems of support for rural students. Recently we adopted a refreshed strategy for 2020–2024 that includes a commitment to continue dedicating a portion of our funds to work in rural areas, with an emphasis on collaborative efforts that span multiple institutions, sectors, or communities.

In addition to grantmaking, we actively seek to develop relationships and identify partnership opportunities in rural areas of the state, including through our membership in Texas Rural Funders, a collaborative of philanthropic organizations seeking to bring additional resources and attention to rural Texas.³ We also support research and reporting on rural issues as part of a broader effort to focus attention and resources on these important communities.

Although we have much more to learn about rural communities in our state, our work to date has taught us three lessons worth sharing with our colleagues in philanthropy:

1. Rural communities can develop innovative models for postsecondary support that fit their unique strengths and needs.
2. To make the strongest impact, invest in programs and in building capacity.

³ See <https://texasruralfunders.org>.

3. There is no substitute for visiting in person.

Innovative Models

Often, we hear deficit-based narratives about rural communities that emphasize limited resources, struggling economies, and a refusal to adapt to change. Our experience has been quite different. We are privileged to support collaborations across Texas that address barriers to education in creative and resourceful ways.

Lee College, a two-year institution of higher education serving the city of Baytown and its neighboring counties, recognized that high school students on the outskirts of its service area in Liberty County had to travel up to 46 miles one way to attend dual-credit classes on campus, a barrier that made dual-credit participation prohibitive for many. By partnering with five school districts, local community development corporations, and GTF, the college established the Lee College Education Center in Liberty to provide dual-credit classes leading to an associate degree or certificate, as well as continuing education, GED classes, and ESL instruction for adults in the community. Dual-credit participation for students in this underserved region increased by 23% thanks to the partnership.

On the opposite side of the state, the Roscoe Collegiate Independent School District (RCISD) tackled the same challenge — providing students access to diverse postsecondary pathways — in a different way. District leaders transformed their traditional high school into an early college high school and developed a comprehensive curriculum that begins preparing students for college and career from preschool onward. They also partnered with regional employers to establish veterinary technician, drone operation, welding, and other certificate programs. In 2010, 38% of RCISD seniors attained an associate degree from Western Texas College upon completing high school; today, more than 90% reach that milestone in addition to graduating with an array of skills that make them highly employable. With support from GTF, the district has become a demonstration site for other districts interested in building their own comprehensive college and career readiness models.

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Advising and Teacher Development

The foundation funded another collaboration to address a different barrier for rural students: limited access to college and career advising. The Rural Student Success Initiative (RSSI) is led by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, a well-established, trusted agency with a presence in nearly every county in the state. This multiyear demonstration project delivers intensive technical assistance to 15 rural school districts across Texas so they can maximize local assets and develop partnerships to collectively build a college-going culture and improve students' postsecondary outcomes. Although the RSSI is still in its early stages, participating districts already have made strides in developing the data infrastructure they need to track student outcomes and in providing students with critical resources, including college fairs and transportation to local institutions of higher education.

We also have seen unique solutions to another challenge: professional development for teachers who have limited opportunities close to home and few, if any, peers teaching the same subject matter in their school or district. Advancing Inquiry in Middle Mathematics (AIMM) is a joint

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initiative of the University of Texas at Tyler, Sam Houston State University, and Stephen F. Austin University to provide East Texas math teachers with high-quality support to improve their math instruction. Through a combination of in-person meetings, observations, site visits, online instruction, and reflective assignments, the program reduces the barriers created by geographic distance and allows educators to broaden their network of colleagues. Participants report the techniques and attitudes they have learned through AIMM are contributing to increased achievement and engagement in their classrooms.

Meanwhile, a team of researchers at Texas A&M University-Commerce exploring low-cost, high-quality approaches to professional development for rural educators found that even a simple intervention like a series of videos on research-based instructional techniques can enable educators to adopt more effective teaching strategies and let go of approaches that do not serve students as well.

An Asset-Based Perspective

These are just a few examples of the inventive and resourceful work happening across Texas

to ensure rural students receive educational opportunities just as rich as those offered to their urban and suburban peers. Although each of these initiatives is unique, they share common keys to success: strong local leaders who are committed to their students, a thorough and data-based understanding of barriers and opportunities in the community, and at least one partnership with another organization to maximize resources and fill gaps.

As a funder, we certainly can't take credit for the success of these initiatives; all credit goes to the people doing the work. What we can say, though, is that if we viewed rural communities through a deficit lens, we would not have seen the potential of these efforts and would not have dedicated resources to support them. What a loss that would have been for rural Texas students and for us. There are many more opportunities to fund high-impact education initiatives in rural areas for funders who are looking for them with an asset-based perspective.

Balance Program Support and Capacity Building

Funders sometimes wrestle with the question of whether philanthropic dollars are best spent solving system-level problems or addressing immediate needs. In the education field, issues like limited postsecondary opportunities, teacher isolation, and poverty require long-term attention and investment. Meanwhile, though, thousands of students need access to college and career pathways, rigorous instruction, and resources now.

This dilemma is particularly pointed in rural areas. Small towns, school districts, and institutions of higher education necessarily have lean staffing structures, leaving leaders and educators very little time for the kinds of activities that lend themselves to systems change. Accessing and analyzing student data, engaging in strategic planning, and participating in conferences and other learning opportunities are difficult to manage on top of critical day-to-day responsibilities like keeping buses running and classrooms staffed — particularly if extensive

travel is required. At the same time, with limited financial resources it can be difficult to sustain fundamental programs and activities that meet students' immediate needs.

Given this tension, we believe supporting both capacity building and direct service is critical if we want to serve rural communities well. We try to balance long-term and short-term priorities across our rural portfolio — to see the forest and the trees all at once. On the “forest” level, we invest in knowledge-building activities to inform important decisions that impact rural students and schools. We joined our colleagues at Texas Rural Funders to support a rural component of the research phase for the Texas 2036 statewide strategic plan, for example, along with a symposium on rural Texas exploring what the data mean for our state.

We also fund smaller-scale research and capacity-building work to strengthen the long-term viability of organizations serving rural communities. The Rural Student Success Initiative, for instance, grew out of a small planning grant that allowed extension leaders to travel the state learning about postsecondary needs in rural communities, then develop a vision not only for the program itself, but also for its evaluability and sustainability. Beyond funding, we build capacity by connecting our rural colleagues with each other and with the rest of our network so they can learn from each other, discover new ideas for using existing resources, and collaborate to solve shared problems.

At the same time, we give attention to the “trees” to help meet immediate needs where we can. Our partnership with RCISD is a good example. The grant covered a portion of the costs associated with becoming a demonstration site to drive statewide learning — but it also included support for day-to-day needs like faculty professional development and parent meetings. Similarly, GTF's funding for AIMM enabled us to learn about a novel approach to instructional change, but it also provided stipends and supplies for the teachers who participated.

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We continue to think carefully about this issue as we expand our network of rural partners. We want to leverage the power of strategic planning, research, program evaluation, and dissemination to help grantees make their work sustainable because we don't have the wherewithal to support even the most successful organizations in perpetuity. At the same time, we cannot forget that sometimes, a short-term infusion of funding for direct services is exactly what a community needs to build momentum toward their long-term goals.

Visit Communities in Person

This principle is true for grantmaking in any context, but we have found it especially powerful in our relationships with organizations serving rural students. We have traveled to St. Augustine, Nacogdoches, Roscoe, Schulenberg, and other Texas communities to get to know applicants and see firsthand the impact of GTF's grants. Each time, we have started the visit with questions and uncertainties, and each time we have come away with deeper understanding and confidence. The opportunity to see for ourselves a community's strengths, needs, people, and plans makes all the difference in our understanding of the work we are potentially or currently funding.

In one case, a rural organization submitted an ambitious proposal for a regional collaboration to strengthen dual-credit participation and

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outcomes. Although their end goal resonated with us, we were concerned that the plan faced logistical challenges and sought to accomplish too much in a short period of time. Instead of terminating the application process, however, we accepted an invitation to visit in person with representatives of the collaborative. The detailed discussion that ensued showed us how committed and thoughtful the team had been as they developed the project. The meeting also allowed us to clarify certain elements of our funding process and share what we knew about similar efforts in other rural parts of the state. As a result, we were able to award a planning grant, enabling the collaborative to draw up a well-researched blueprint for a sustainable dual-credit program that met their community's needs.

Texas is large and our staff is small, so we still rely on telephone, video, and email for much of our work. Communication through any medium is incredibly important. We appreciate any opportunity we have, though, to spend time face to face with the smart, dedicated people who serve students in rural Texas.

Our strategy for serving rural communities continues to evolve as we learn more. For example,

we recently shifted from a broad interest in proposals from rural applicants to a more specific focus on fostering collaboration and collective action. Our rationale for this shift was that given the small size and limited resources of individual rural communities, the impact of a grant to a single organization working independently will be modest and short-lived. On the other hand, making grants that allow multiple entities in a region to work together yields a number of benefits: more extensive buy-in from a wider range of stakeholders, pooled resources to foster long-term sustainability, shared knowledge, a more diverse range of perspectives to inform the work, and economies of scale. We are also continuing to build our network of rural colleagues, mindful that as a funder located in a city, we need to lean heavily on those with direct experience in rural Texas to understand the communities we seek to serve.

Funder Support for Rural Communities

There is one final lesson we have learned about rural philanthropy so far: there isn't nearly enough of it. According to the most recent analysis, 19% of the U.S. population lives in a rural area, but only 6%–7% of private grantmaking benefits rural communities (Pender, 2015). Funders spend about \$88 per person in rural communities, about half of what they spend per person in urban communities. Granted, this analysis was conducted in 2015 based on 2005–2010 data — but the age of the data itself suggests greater attention to rural philanthropy is warranted.

The good news is that your organization doesn't need to dramatically alter its strategy or adopt a formal portfolio focused on rural issues (although we won't argue against it!). You don't need a special process or set of standards to manage rural grants; we handle ours the same way we do the rest of our portfolio. There are, however, simple steps any funder can take to support rural communities in ways that align with their mission and strategy:

- Become familiar with data on rural students in or near the regions you serve. The Rural

School and Community Trust³ is a good place to start; its biennial *Why Rural Matters* reports offer detailed data about rural education conditions in each state. Your state education agency, the USDA's Atlas of Rural and Small-Town America,⁴ and the U.S. Census Bureau are rich resources as well. As you dig in, you may well find that answers to some of your questions have not yet been explored and published. These are opportunities for your organization to build the field by supporting new research.

- Visit and build relationships in rural parts of your service area to proactively identify opportunities for partnership. Local officials, district superintendents, and college leaders can provide you with important context and connect you to other community members. Listen carefully and ask questions.
- When appropriate, consider asking applicants focused on urban areas if it is feasible to include a rural site in their proposed work, or to add a rural lens to their proposed research project. You don't want to force work that isn't a fit, of course, but in some cases you may find that the organization welcomes the opportunity to extend their impact.
- When needed, take some extra time to guide rural applicants through your organization's funding process and expectations if they are new to your work. As with the value of in-person visits, this is a principle that holds true for any applicant, regardless of whether they represent an urban or rural community. It is especially important when working with applicants from rural areas, however, since leaders in smaller communities often play multiple roles and may have less time to fine-tune a grant proposal given the extent of their other responsibilities. It may also be necessary to work to identify an appropriate fiscal agent for the grant if the

original applicant does not have structures in place that would allow them to manage the funds directly. This initial investment of time upfront will yield a higher-quality application and grant in the long term.

Although our five years of intentional funding and partnership in rural Texas have yielded significant benefits, we know there remain many more opportunities to support rural students as they pursue their postsecondary goals. We look forward to deepening our learning and impact — and we hope you'll join us.

³ See <http://www.ruraledu.org>

⁴ See <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/atlas-of-rural-and-small-town-america/>

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