**An Alternative Approach to Community College Rural Service Designation**

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**Introduction**

Community Colleges serving rural regions of the United States are an essential component of the nation’s higher education system, providing quality higher education access, regardless of the student’s geographic origin. As community colleges have grown in importance, the rural and urban designations that once clearly defined two distinct categories in our nation’s settlement pattern have blurred. Likewise, prior policy targeting approaches to assure rural serving institutions were equitably considered in federal funding formulas may no longer adequately reflect the “rural” services provided across these institutions, as distinct rural and urban designations fail to address the actual services continuum, across these areas, or the dynamics through which students and institutions currently interact, across these old policy boundaries.

Today, policy targeting to effectively address these current rural realities must address two unique rural challenges - the amazing diversity of rural places, and the changing settlement patterns and workforce opportunities in and around the current network of community colleges serving these regions.

**An Alternate Approach to Rural Service Designation**

RUPRI has collaborated for over two decades with the American Association of Community Colleges and the Rural Community College Alliance in efforts to assure the critical role community colleges play in rural human and social capital development, workforce training, economic and community development, and social mobility are well understood and equitably resourced by the public sector. At the same time, RUPRI has also sought to advance appreciation for regional innovation, and the role which Micropolitan Areas and other regional rural growth hubs play in the future prosperity of the rural people and places in their rural geography surrounding them. (See – *Micropolitan America: A New and Critical Part of the Nation’s Geography[[1]](#footnote-1))*

As Congress begins work on a new Farm Bill, including the Rural Development Title which contains specific targeting language for rural community college funding, we undertook a pilot analysis, to simply test one possible approach for acknowledging and acting upon these settlement patterns and workforce development dynamics, to address the rural service of community colleges located in mid-range population centers.

In a world of perfect information, knowing the residential location of every student attending a given community college and identifying the percent of student enrollment residing in rural locations would be ideal. Without this information, using the commuting patterns of the local labor market around a community college may serve as an alternative proxy for the service area of that college. Historically, many community colleges have had missions to serve the occupational/workforce needs of their regional labor markets. This rationale serves as a basis for identifying a rural service area and then specifically identifying those community colleges that could be classified as rural serving.

To undertake this analysis, census tracts were identified in which the street address of the community college is located. This tract was treated as the labor market source (work location) for jobs in the region. The residential census tracts of all those employed in the census tract where the community college is located were next identified. These residential census tracts were then considered the “service area” of the community college. We then arbitrarily established the following:

*A community college is defined as “rural serving” if at least 50% of the employed workforce of the census tract in which the community college is located reside in census tracts located in either rural tracts or in urban cluster tracts*[[2]](#footnote-2). (See footnote for rationale).

**Pilot Analysis**

# A group of five states in the Upper Midwest, Great Plains, and South were analyzed using this definition. A subset of rural colleges was the focus of this analysis –community colleges residing in places with populations between 20,000 and 50,000 in population.[[3]](#footnote-3) This subset of community colleges falls between categories considered in some policies as “rural” or “urban,” per place-based population. Residential and workforce commuting data used to calculate the percent rural population came from the US Census Bureau’s Local Employment Household Dynamics Project.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Figure 1. Percent of Community Colleges Classified as Having a “Rural Service Area” Located in Places Between 20,000 – 50,000 in Population

**Major Findings, Limitations, Considerations**

* In four of the five states analyzed, over half of the community colleges in places between 20,000 and 50,000 in population would be classified as having a “Rural Service Area.”
* Some states have community colleges that serve mostly remote rural or metropolitan student populations and are located in places with settlement patterns very similar to their service area. As a result, some states (like Michigan) have far fewer community colleges that fit within this population range consideration.
* Census tract commuting patterns increase the precision of the labor market commuting analysis of this study. At the same time, they may also misinterpret the true “rural character” of the service area of the community college, if that college is training a workforce focusing on the entire county’s employed workforce and the settlement patterns of the county’s workforce and the individual census tract workforce do not align.
* This analysis does not exclude community colleges located “in the shadow of” larger urbanized areas.

**Conclusion**

Given that populations can change over time in small and medium-sized towns where community colleges are located, solely using the rural characteristics of these places as a targeting mechanism may not fully capture their current geographic mission. Using the “service area” of a community college may offer an additional factor for consideration, to assure targeting of all those programs actually improves access to higher education for rural residents. Unfortunately, the heterogeneous nature of US settlement patterns makes it difficult to find a definition that captures all rural-serving community colleges.

We recognize that the heterogeneous nature of US settlement patterns makes finding one definition that captures all rural-serving community colleges nearly impossible. However, this is a challenge in all sectors of public policy seeking to advantage rural access to services and/or funding. RUPRI has worked across the rural portfolio of most Congressional Committees regarding this challenge, and has consistently urged that targeting approaches should reflect actual practices in rural areas, wherever possible, because of regional service efficiencies, as well as the diversity of rural places and institutions. This pilot analysis is just one of these.

1. Cordes, S.M PhD and Fannin, J. M PhD. *Micropolitan America: A New and Critical Part of the Nation’s Geography.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For this analysis, a rural tract is one in which the geographic center of the census tract is located outside an urbanized area or cluster. A tract is considered an urban cluster tract if its geographic center lies inside the area of an urbanized cluster (a collection of contiguous census block or block groups that sum to between 2,500 and 49,999 in population as defined by the US Census). For example, many counties that have a mostly rural settlement pattern may have a small urbanized cluster such as their county seat. A subset of the rural service area is classified as “High Rural” if at least 50% of the employed census tract workforce resides in strictly rural census tracts (no urban cluster tracts included). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Places used for this analysis were incorporated places or Census Designated Places (CDP) from the 2010 US Census. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://lehd.ces.census.gov/>. Commuting data sourced from the 2015 Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) for census tracts in the respective states analyzed. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)