

INSIGHTS

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Pathways to Results at Rural Illinois Community Colleges

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Despite recent federal emphasis on place as it relates to rurality, Hillman (2016) finds that geography matters when it comes to college opportunity and attainment, with “education deserts” demonstrating the stratification of opportunity for social mobility, particularly by race, income, and class. Indeed, a recent report on rural education illustrates a growing gap in college completion between rural and urban students, with any identified gains varying across demographic groups (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). Further, in states with large urban centers, such as Illinois, rural students can be largely overlooked in the development and implementation of state policies (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). The Rural School and Community Trust refers to this phenomenon as the “invisibility of rural education” (Johnson et al., 2014, p. 29). This invisibility persists despite the fact that nationally there are 594 publicly controlled rural community college districts representing more than 64% of all districts and serving 3.4 million students (Rural Community College Alliance, 2016). This is problematic not just because of the scale of the institutions and student impacts, but also because while many of the challenges rural institutions face may be similar to those faced by community colleges in urban and suburban contexts, the rural context creates nuances in how these issues are experienced and addressed (Eddy & Murray, 2007).

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One challenge associated with studying rural populations is a definition of what is rural. The Illinois Community College Board (n.d.) identifies 74 of the 102 counties in the state of Illinois as non-metropolitan. However, non-metropolitan does not always equate with rural. To address this challenge, the Office of Rural Health Policy utilizes two methods to determine a rural county designation for the

HIGHLIGHTS

Distance and poverty are identified as primary barriers for rural students seeking opportunities for higher education.

While a rural community college context creates challenges for exposing students to diverse occupations, it can strengthen the institution’s ability to meet the needs of local employers.

The PTR model has benefited rural community colleges via data-driven decision making and enhanced partnerships.

purposes of establishing eligibility for its grant programs (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015). Applying this definition results in a list of 62 Illinois counties, with seven Illinois community college districts composed entirely of rural populations.

With evidence suggesting growing rates of poverty, diversity, and students with special needs in rural school districts (Johnson et al., 2014), it is important to recognize rurality as an implication for equity in higher education. Lacking economies of scale in areas with lower populations and economic decline, rural institutions are especially impacted by inadequate state and local support and shortfalls in federal Pell grant funding (Fluharty & Scaggs, 2007; Katsinas, Malley, & Warner, 2016). Within the context of Illinois, a budget stalemate has hit rural community colleges particularly hard, as evidenced by the need for emergency funding released to seven districts serving rural populations, including two of the districts highlighted in this brief (Illinois Community College Board, 2017).

To further explore some of the nuances of serving community colleges students in a rural context, interviews were conducted with professionals at three Illinois community colleges participating in Pathways to Results (PTR), an outcomes-focused, equity-guided process to improve student transition to and through postsecondary education and into employment. Sauk Valley Community College is located in Dixon, Illinois, and serves all or part of five counties in northwest Illinois. Rend Lake College is located in Ina, Illinois, reaching eight counties in southern Illinois. Both colleges were selected as members of the FY16 cohort of PTR Year Two Implementation Communities. Illinois Eastern Community Colleges are composed of Frontier Community College, Lincoln Trail College, Olney Central College, and Wabash Valley College, serving all or part of 12 counties in southeastern Illinois. The Office of Community College Research and Leadership would like to sincerely thank those individuals from teams at Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, Rend Lake College and Sauk Valley Community College who participated in interviews contributing to this brief.

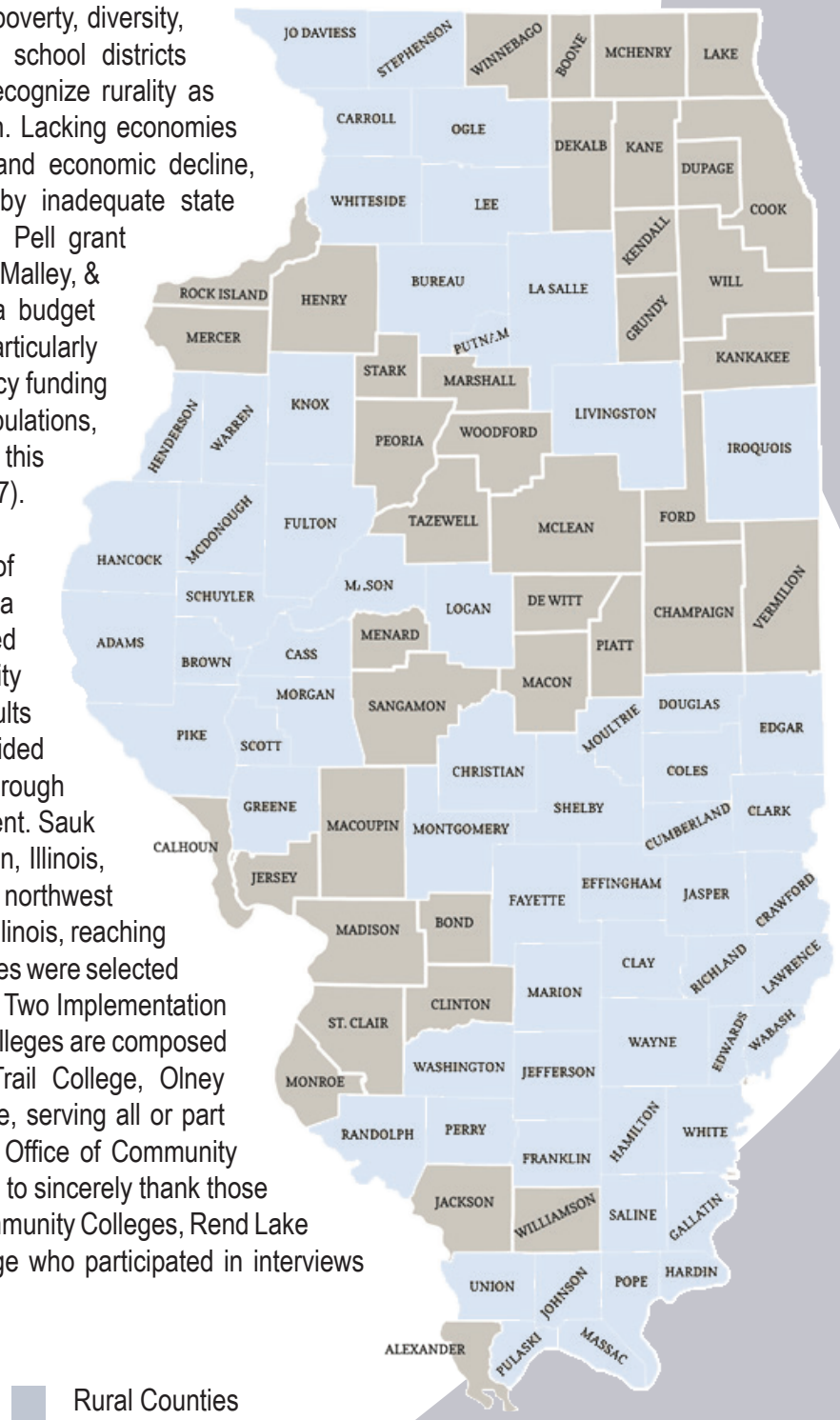


Figure 1. Illinois Rural Counties

Implications for College Aspirations

While recent research finds that the numbers of rural youth aspiring to attend and complete college are increasing (Meece et al., 2013), interviewees indicated the challenge of creating a college-going culture in rural communities. It was noted that in the most remote areas of Sauk Valley's district, a generational lack of college attendance is a cultural issue that remains a significant challenge to overcome. In efforts to address the issue, Sauk Valley modeled a classroom in each of their most remote high schools to look like one of their college classrooms and began offering evening classes in those spaces. At Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, partnerships with high schools are important to encouraging the development of a college-going culture. In discussing the importance of dual credit, a staff member identifies one of the purposes as "show[ing] people who never thought about college that they can go to college, that college is attainable, accessible to them." At Rend Lake, a staff member finds that having a person with local roots reach the level of the presidency can effectively challenge student perceptions that "college is different from who they think they are."

For rural students who pursue college, research has found that vocationalism is a dominant influence in rural students' decision-making processes. In general, rural students place a greater emphasis on the relevance of their educational goals to their occupational goals and outcomes in their immediate communities (Meece et al., 2013; Robbins, 2012). At Rend Lake, this mindset is reported to be evident during interactions with high school students. A staff member from Rend Lake describes a primary consequence of living in a rural area being that students are not aware of the many options that are actually available to them in terms of colleges or careers.

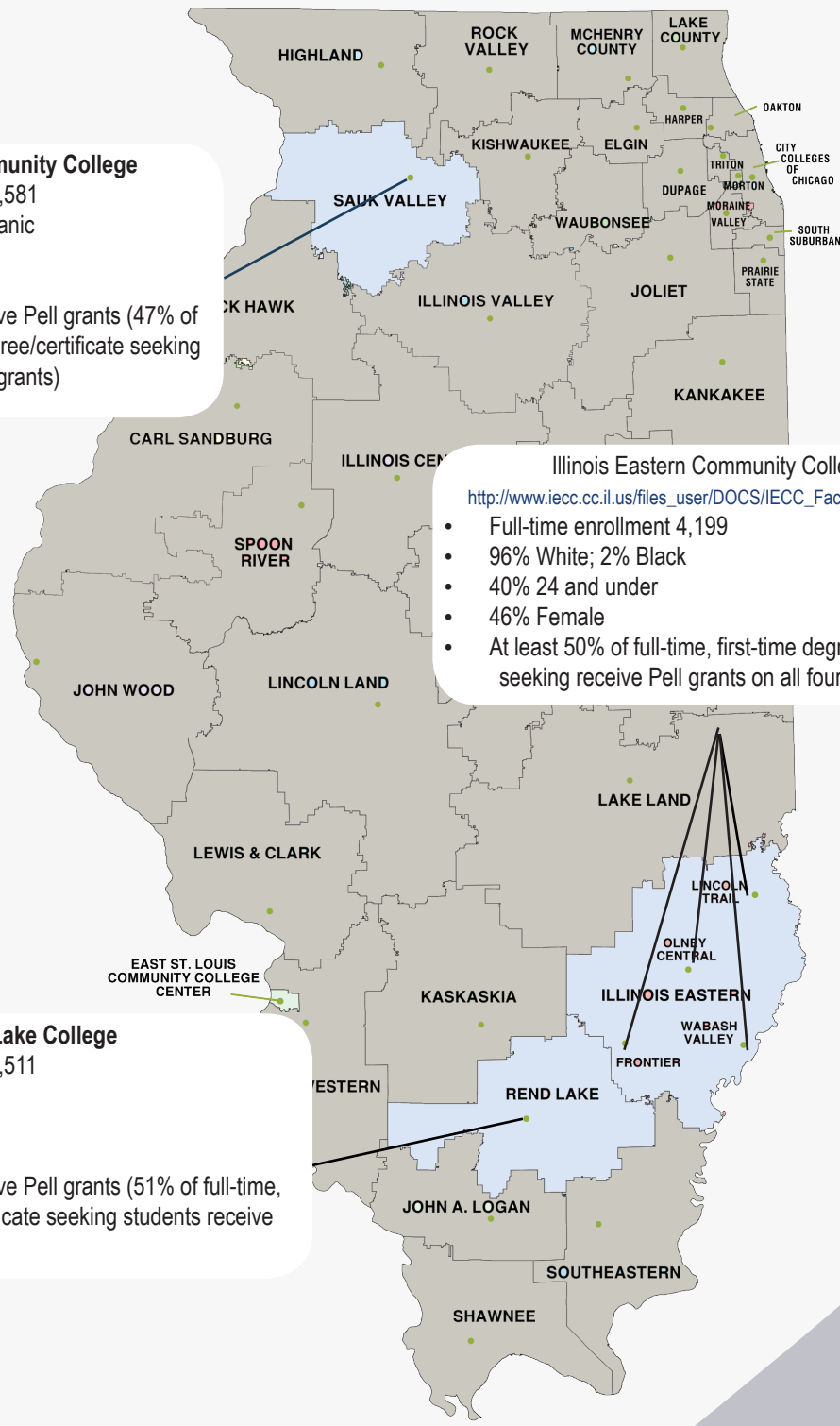
Implications for Access

Despite the challenges that exist for rural students aspiring to attend college, a staff member at Sauk Valley Community College indicates that competition is growing even for rural students. Noting advances in technology and the growth of for-profit institutions, it is especially pertinent for rural community colleges to show their communities that they still have the most value while providing high quality when it comes to higher education. At all of the colleges interviewed for this brief, distance and poverty were identified as primary barriers to rural student access.

Without access to public transportation and with commutes that can be an hour or more each way, distance is a unique challenge for rural students. Reliable transportation is an important financial consideration, especially for low-income students. For students attending Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, proximity to a campus can influence not only their decision to enroll but also their program of study. A staff member notes that students sometimes change their aspirations to match the programs offered at the campus located closest to them.

Poverty, especially generational and persistent poverty, is found to be more pronounced in rural areas (Bowen, Kurzwil, & Tobin, 2005; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Meece et al., 2013; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Byun, Irvin, & Meece (2015) suggest that large numbers of low-income and first-generation students in rural areas indicate "a double jeopardy situation" for college access (p. 275). However, interview respondents noted the transformational impact of student support services like TRIO that can provide opportunities and support for students experiencing financial barriers on their campuses.

In discussing the importance of dual credit, a staff member identifies one of the purposes as "show[ing] people who never thought about college that they can go to college, that college is attainable, accessible to them."



Sauk Valley Community College

- Full-time enrollment 1,581
- 80% White; 14% Hispanic
- 71% 24 and under
- 61% Female
- 39% of students receive Pell grants (47% of full-time, first-time degree/certificate seeking students receive Pell grants)

Illinois Eastern Community Colleges
http://www.iecc.cc.il.us/files_user/DOCS/IECC_Fact_Book_2016.pdf

- Full-time enrollment 4,199
- 96% White; 2% Black
- 40% 24 and under
- 46% Female
- At least 50% of full-time, first-time degree/certificate seeking receive Pell grants on all four campuses

Rend Lake College

- Full-time enrollment 2,511
- 91% White; 6% Black
- 70% 24 and under
- 58% Female
- 30% of students receive Pell grants (51% of full-time, first-time degree/certificate seeking students receive Pell grants)

Figure 2. Quick Facts on Sample Rural Colleges

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for 2014-2015 via National Center for Education Statistics (2016).

Implications for Employment

An additional challenge for rural students can be limited employment options in the local area, especially for those students who are unable to leave their home communities. Respondents noted that in areas that are more metropolitan there are not only more options for employment after college, but also more opportunities to explore various occupations in the way of tours and networking. At Rend Lake College, this was identified to be both a strength and challenge as it allows the college to specifically tailor its programs to meet the needs of local employers, but it also means that there are a limited number of jobs available locally to students.

Interview respondents indicated that health professions, welding, agriculture, manufacturing, and criminal justice are popular programs among rural students. It was noted that the higher income potential of and growing opportunities associated with the health professions makes this pathway particularly appealing to students. At Rend Lake, a staff member indicated that having career and technical education faculty play dual roles as advisors and instructors has been advantageous in developing relationships with both employers and four-year institutions. As a result, partnerships to support employability and continuing education within career and technical education programs via 2+2 agreements have been strengthened.

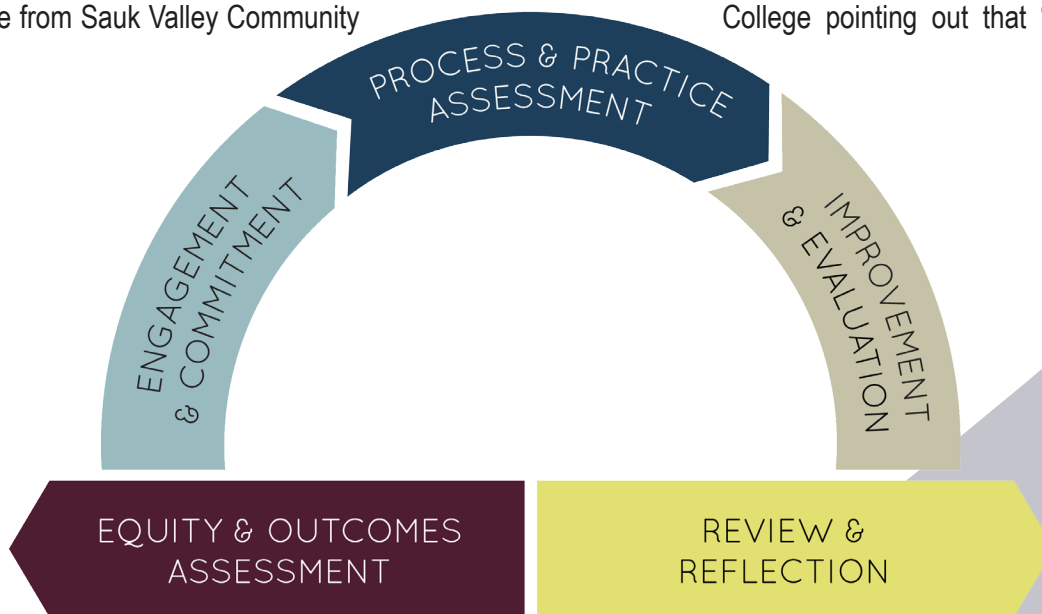


Pathways to Results in a Rural Institutional Context

The [Pathways to Results](#) model was reported to benefit the rural institutions featured in this brief the most in terms of making data-driven decisions and enhancing partnerships. At Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, the PTR model was identified as a benefit to supporting larger institutional goals to better store, report, and extract data. Furthermore, the PTR approach is meaningful since it identifies who is not succeeding and where they stop out. Moving beyond identifying equity gaps, Rend Lake College participants found that the benefits continue with support for evaluating improvement strategies as well as opportunities to obtain feedback from colleagues at other institutions. Moving beyond the quantitative data, Sauk Valley Community College found that collecting qualitative data from students to avoid the pitfalls associated with a reliance on anecdotal information that can lead to incorrect assumptions was valuable to their project.

Respondents have found that the model has strengthened both internal and external partnerships. For Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, the time and travel required for outreach to secondary partners is a challenge. However, participating in Pathways to Results has improved communication with secondary partners and helped to “illustrate the value of having secondary representatives on our advisory councils. . . if we want a pipeline of students, we need them at the table every time we’re working on curriculum.” At Sauk Valley Community College, applying the model to program review reportedly engages faculty and can build relationships even among competing employers. Sauk Valley Community College’s most recent Pathways to Results project resulted in multiple employer partnerships and doubled enrollment in their Multicraft program.

While defining equity in rural populations can be a challenge, respondents noted that socio-economic status and geographical equity within their districts are important considerations. Given smaller numbers of students in individual programs and pathways, it can also be a challenge to effectively measure the impact of improvements. Limitations on faculty and staff time can also create challenges in the ability of Pathways to Results teams at rural institutions to take full advantage of opportunities for in-person networking within their respective Pathways to Results cohorts if it involves off-campus travel. Despite these challenges, the participating colleges identified Pathways to Results as a valuable tool that can serve as an impetus for change, particularly in contexts where there are limited resources, with a representative from Sauk Valley Community College pointing out that “our size is our strength.”



Transforming Systems to Achieve Equitable Outcomes

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Additional Resources

Council for the Study of Community Colleges
Illinois Community College Board
Rural Community College Alliance
Rural School and Community Trust

About the Author

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