

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD ON RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES  
BY MDC, INC.  
FOR THE NEW EXPEDITIONS COMMISSION**

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Rural community colleges can transform rural economies and the prospects of their people. That was what we believed when the Rural Community College Initiative was created four years ago. After working with the 24 community and tribal colleges that participate in RCCI, we believe it even more firmly today.

These colleges, in partnership with their communities, are stimulating entrepreneurship and business development, preparing people for productive work, spearheading telecommunications networks, and providing leadership for regional development. They are reaching out to people in all walks of life, giving them access to education and economic opportunity. And the RCCI colleges are not alone -- many other rural community colleges around the country could tell similar stories of enriching communities, building economies, and expanding individual opportunity.

Yet rural community colleges are an undervalued resource. State and federal policies, designed to suit an increasingly urban and suburban landscape, too often leave rural communities and institutions behind. Too few leaders at any level appreciate the special contributions rural colleges make to their communities. And too few understand what these institutions need in order to fulfill their potential as catalysts for community renewal, economic growth, and educational development.

**A Rural Portrait**

There are 700 rural community colleges in the U.S., representing two-thirds of all public two-year institutions. Like their communities, rural colleges tend to be small. One-third have fewer than 1,000 students, and two-thirds have enrollment below 2,500. (In contrast, urban and suburban single-campus institutions average over 6,500 students.) Rural service areas tend to be large and -- especially in the West -- sparsely populated.

The need for both education and economic development in rural America is great. Rural populations have low levels of educational attainment, the result of out-migration, a culture of low expectations, and economies that offer few opportunities for highly educated workers. One in four rural community colleges serves an economically distressed region. And virtually all the Indian reservations served by the 29 tribal colleges in the continental U.S. suffer from low education levels, high poverty, and extreme unemployment.

**Funding Issues**

Nationwide, funding for community colleges has stagnated at the very time when America needs colleges to expand their missions and enrollment. Furthermore, the

economy's escalating demand for higher levels of education and training calls for new ways of thinking about two-year colleges and how they are funded. The distinction between credit and non-credit programs is increasingly dysfunctional, as are the separate funding streams that keep adult literacy, ESL, degree programs, continuing education, and other community college programs in separate boxes.

These funding issues affect all community colleges but place a particular burden on smaller institutions. The snapshot of the rural community college -- small student body, large service area, undereducated population, and (in many cases) distressed economy -- makes it clear that these institutions need additional resources to fulfill their mission. Like inner-city colleges, they serve a population that requires intensive services from aggressive outreach to counseling, remediation, distance education, child care, and transportation assistance.

RCCI colleges are strongly committed to increasing educational access for poor people, and many do so through special grants. (The federally funded Trio programs are an especially important resource.) These colleges reach out to first-generation college-goers, low-literacy adults, high school dropouts, and welfare recipients as well as traditional high school graduates, helping them succeed in college and preparing them for the workplace. But a commitment to aggressive access should not be limited to special programs at the most devoted colleges. It should be part of the basic mission for which all colleges receive core funding.

Besides requiring the funding necessary to serve a needy population -- a characteristic they share with inner city campuses -- rural colleges have unique funding needs. Because of their small size and large service areas, rural colleges lack the economies of scale that benefit larger, urban and suburban institutions; they have a high operational cost per student. And in states where colleges rely on local tax districts, rural colleges receive meager local appropriations because their districts tend to be poor.

### **Leadership**

The aging of community college leadership is another issue of concern to all colleges, but it takes on particular urgency for rural institutions. In the mid 1990s, AACC projected that 40% of current community college faculty and administrators would retire by 2000. Yet masters and doctoral programs that cultivate future community college leaders are fewer than ever.

Here's the rural twist: Urban community colleges can recruit administrators from anywhere, but rural colleges more often develop their leaders from within. Isolated rural communities have difficulty attracting highly educated outsiders. Many of the best rural presidents and administrators are natives to the region who worked their way up, got their graduate degrees, and came home. The proposed new MidSouth Center for Rural Community Colleges at Mississippi State and Alcorn State Universities will help meet the need for homegrown leaders in the Deep South. Other regions could benefit from similar programs.

## **Economic and Community Development**

In urban America, a variety of organizations provide leadership for economic development. In rural America, community colleges and tribal colleges are often the only “common ground” institutions that can bring together leaders from business, government, education, and grassroots organizations to formulate a common vision and work collaboratively on development strategies. In many small communities, the college is the only institution with the stature, stability, resources, and flexibility to be the hub, broker, and convening force for economic and community development.

The quality of a region’s workforce and the education level of its people have become the most important criteria for economic development potential. This puts community colleges on the front lines, more than ever, in their regions’ struggle to achieve prosperity. But to succeed, community colleges must be recognized as catalysts for economic development, and rural colleges must be funded to play this vital role.

Across the country, community colleges make their most substantial contribution to economic development by preparing people for the workforce. But small and rural colleges face barriers to providing high-quality workforce education. They struggle to maintain up-to-date equipment. They cannot achieve the economies of scale that would make customized training programs self-supporting. And rural colleges find it difficult to offer important high-cost, low-volume curricula (such as nursing or advanced technical programs) that would prepare students for rewarding careers and spark economic development.

States can help by matching community college districts, where possible, with service areas for workforce boards under the Workforce Investment Act. Many rural colleges already operate effective one-stop employment and training centers, and more can do so under WIA. States can ensure that rural employers have access to high-quality training by providing base support for business and industry liaisons -- community college staff who develop programs tailored to employers’ needs. And states can encourage small colleges to collaborate regionally in providing workforce training.

Telecommunications is new tool. The information highway can become the farm-to-market road of the next century, giving rural colleges the capacity to deliver state-of-the-art instruction and enabling rural businesses to expand their markets and upgrade their workforce. It can also link isolated rural communities with distant colleges and universities. But to put traffic on the rural highway, colleges need equipment, software, professional development, and technical assistance. And their communities need up-to-date infrastructure. State and federal assistance for rural telecommunications is essential.

Beyond workforce education, rural colleges play vital roles in technology transfer, small business development, and entrepreneurship education. They organize manufacturing networks and broker specialized technical assistance to small firms; they bring state-of-the-art knowledge to isolated rural businesses. They teach aspiring

entrepreneurs how to operate a successful business. Some colleges even manage business incubators and create loan funds. Rural community colleges could be even more effective in these arenas if states recognized their potential and funded them accordingly.

### **Rural Presidents Speak Out**

At a recent RCCI gathering, presidents were asked which trends pose the greatest challenges and opportunities to their institutions and their communities over the next twenty years. Their concerns matched the issues highlighted here: Rural colleges need adequate funding to provide high-quality education. Rural communities need support for telecommunications. Rural colleges should be recognized as convenors for their communities and catalysts for economic development. And, as rural colleges and communities look to the future, they must find creative ways to adapt to an aging population and workforce.

Above all, the presidents affirmed their commitment to educational access and equity. One president summed it up by saying the community college mission is “to provide hope for people who otherwise wouldn’t have opportunity.” This imperative unites rural, urban, and suburban colleges, and it must be a central theme of New Expeditions.

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