Innovative Strategies to Close Postsecondary Attainment Gaps

Four Regional Approaches to Support Rural Students

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IHEP

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Rural America has been largely abandoned by higher education for too long.

Nearly 41 million American adults live 25 miles or more from the nearest university or college, or in areas where only a single community college offers accessible public higher education.[1] This physical isolation leads to stark economic inequities, where the wealthiest 10 percent of the nation's zip codes are considered "college-rich" metro areas while a majority of the poorest zip codes are classified as rural.[2] As employers across the country continue to struggle to fill vacancies with a workforce that does not have the postsecondary training required for the majority of our nation's future jobs, rural residents in particular face significant challenges in achieving upward economic mobility. Furthermore, the restricted access to educational opportunity impacts rural communities' economic development as they lack the business and cultural amenities that higher education institutions often generate in more densely-populated areas.

Fortunately, there are several rural communities across the nation that have more recently committed to expanding postsecondary opportunities for their residents and are seeing early and exciting success due to their innovative strategies. This guidebook outlines three leading strategies that have yielded promise in four such communities—Columbus, IN; Elkhart County, IN; Rio Grande Valley, TX; Shasta County, CA—that have been designated as "Talent Hub" Communities by Lumina Foundation, with support from the Kresge Foundation, primarily for their ability to truly work across different sectors to significantly increase college-level learning among residents of all backgrounds.

Researchers at the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) spoke with stakeholders involved with the Talent Hubs initiative in each of these communities to learn more about the development, implementation, and equity concerns at the heart of programs impacting rural students. Each community emphasized: (1) the importance of understanding the specific postsecondary barriers their respective populations faced; (2) the critical need for higher education to be creative in challenging its traditional methods of recruiting and serving students; and (3) needing to intentionally form partnerships between education and workforce stakeholders to lead to more positive outcomes for not only students but the community at large. This guidebook outlines these three strategies, with excerpts from in-depth conversations with each community, and concludes by sharing key recommendations and advice from these four Talent Hubs for likeminded rural communities who are interested in raising their attainment rates and revving their engines of economic growth.

1. Rosenboom, V. & Blagg, K. (2018). Three million Americans are disconnected from higher education. Urban Institute. Retrieved from https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/three-million-americans-are-disconnected-higher-education

2. Fikri, K. Lettieri, J. and Steller, S. (2018). Escape Velocity: How elite communities are pulling away in the 21st century race for jobs, businesses, and human capital. Economic Innovation Group's Distressed Communities Index Series. Retrieved from: https://eig.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Escape-Velocity-Report.pdf

ABOUT THE TALENT HUBS

POPULATION: 255,203   MEDIAN AGE: 42.4   MEDIAN INCOME: $45,581   POPULATION DENSITY: 25.8   AREA (LAND): 9,903.80

Shasta is located in the rural upper north region of California where access to postsecondary education is limited – Shasta College and College of the Siskiyous are the only options in the area, and both are public, two-year institutions. Thirty-five percent of adults in the region have some college and no degree. Recognizing the need for a solution to meet the educational needs of returning adults students in particular, Shasta created two innovative programs – The Accelerated College Education (ACE) program, designed to guide students to a degree or certificate in one to two years, and the Bachelors through Online and Local Degrees (BOLD) program, which provides a home base and support to resources at Shasta College while students complete an online bachelor's degree program at a partnering four-year institution. These programs are helping to close the postsecondary attainment gaps in the Shasta region while uniquely meeting the needs of adult students in a rural area.

POPULATION: 1,344,999   MEDIAN AGE: 29.9   MEDIAN INCOME: $36,216   POPULATION DENSITY: 314.6   AREA (LAND): 4,275.75

The **Rio Grande Valley (RGV)** in Texas is one of the fastest growing regions in the U.S. and is home to 1.35 million people along the Texas-Mexico border. The region is comprised of four counties – Cameron, Hidalgo, Staff and Willacy – and is young, Latino, and bicultural. The economy in this region has transitioned from agricultural-based to one focused on health and professional services, education, advanced manufacturing, and retail. This economic shift has highlighted the need for an increased focus on educational achievement, given the connection between higher earnings and job security with a postsecondary degree or certificate. The dual-enrollment academies at South Texas College (STC) are a unique community solution to meeting the region's workforce needs and providing a pathway to postsecondary education for their traditional-aged students.

POPULATION: 202,924   MEDIAN AGE: 35.4   MEDIAN INCOME: $52,449   POPULATION DENSITY: 438.1   AREA (LAND): 463.17

In **Elkhart County**, Indiana the Horizon Education Alliance (HEA) works with community partners to address the region's workforce needs by developing pathways for people to pursue post-secondary credentials that will give them the necessary skills for local industries. Elkhart County has a shortage of qualified workers, as only 25 percent of adults in the region have a post-secondary degree. The community has developed a "pathways to postsecondary credentials" approach to improve educational attainment rates in this area, increasing the marketability and employment prospects for their adult population by focusing on manufacturing skill sets that align with employer demand.

POPULATION: 328,715   MEDIAN AGE: 39.8   MEDIAN INCOME: $54,105   POPULATION DENSITY: 94.8   AREA (LAND): 3,468.74

In **Columbus,** located in Southwest Indiana, the EcO Network is a Community Education Coalition initiative that has been working for over a decade with partners in the region to address adult education needs. The Network consists of education, business, and community partnerships with a shared goal of increasing secondary and postsecondary attainment rates, which are currently insufficient to meet local workforce demands. The Powerhouse Credentials Crosswalk created by the EcO Network aims to raise awareness and understanding of the credentials in high demand by regional employers. The community found that by reconnecting adult education to a broader pathway they were able to form lasting relationships with students and lead them in the direction of educational attainment.

* Median Income is in 2017 inflation-adjusted dollars. Population Density is per square mile.

3. Authors' calculations using data from U.S. Census Bureau, "2013–2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

STRATEGY #1:

RECOGNIZE THE DIVERSITY OF RURAL COMMUNITIES AND TARGET DIFFERENT POPULATIONS WITH DISTINCT SUPPORTS TO SUCCEED IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

IHEP: Who faces postsecondary barriers in your community? How do you address their needs?

COLUMBUS – Our entire region started with a very low baseline for adult attainment—under 30 percent had earned at least an associate's degree. We set an initial goal of reaching 35 percent attainment by 2020. Beyond the general attainment target, however, we are looking at outcomes for the families in our region. For instance, are we helping people increase their quality of life? Are we building an economically stronger Indiana? Are communities healthier? Those are the outcomes we're really after to indicate that adult education is changing lives.

ELKHART – Elkhart County has been identified as one of the top counties in the nation to be impacted by automation and artificial intelligence. While manufacturing jobs are currently readily available for adults without a postsecondary credential, as these industries become increasingly automated it will be critical for adults to have a postsecondary credential to find new employment opportunities. Given our very low educational attainment rates it is easy to see that we have some real challenges in the next few years. We had to ask ourselves how we were going to fill the million jobs that are needed by 2025? Specifically, can we also up-skill good workers to prepare them to fill these new positions given we don't know what the positions are going to look like with the impact of technology?

RIO GRANDE VALLEY – We focus primarily on high-school students, so our services center on welcoming students into the college and embracing a college mindset. Many of our students are the first in their families to attend college, so we built our services to welcome them and celebrate their success or induction into the college. We focus on building memories with these students and having meaningful connections with them.

Our area has a population that is more at risk of not transitioning to college, so creating a college-going culture in our community is critical to helping our students succeed. As local leaders recognized the connection between encouraging a college-going culture while still in high school and postsecondary success, their support increased. We now have one of the largest concentrations of Early College High Schools in the country, which enable eligible high school students to enroll in college courses at no cost while still in high school and obtain a college degree or certificate from South Texas College.

SHASTA – College is out of reach for so many in our area. Shasta College and College of the Siskiyous are the only options in the area, and both are public two-year schools. Because there are no four-year schools in the region, the idea of a low-income, first-generation student who helps take care of the family and works in the family store being told to leave home, find funding, and go live in the dorm at Chico State in order to access higher education is not realistic for many of our community members. When you're in an education desert and don't see higher education every day, it's just not part of the culture like it is in other regions.

> " WHEN YOU'RE IN AN EDUCATION DESERT AND DON'T SEE HIGHER EDUCATION EVERY DAY, IT'S JUST NOT PART OF THE CULTURE LIKE IT IS IN OTHER REGIONS.

Our area has very low post-secondary attainment rates, especially compared to the rest of California and the nation. When we pulled together the data for the counties we serve - Shasta, Tehama, Trinity, Modoc, and

Siskiyou – we found that 35 percent of adults have some college experience, yet no degrees to show for it. In one of our counties, only about 20 percent of the individuals have an associate's or bachelor's degree. That was a big "aha" moment for us, and it led to us thinking about what we could do to better serve adults and encourage them to return to higher education.

STRATEGY #2:

BE CREATIVE IN DESIGNING PROGRAMS THAT MEET STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE, INSTEAD OF EXPECTING STUDENTS TO FIT INTO A HIGHER EDUCATION INFRASTRUCTURE THAT WAS NOT DESIGNED TO MEET THEIR UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES.

IHEP: What are the most innovative and impactful strategies in your community?

SHASTA – We developed both the Accelerated College Education (ACE) program and Bachelors through Online and Local Degrees (BOLD) program as adult student-centered programs offered at Shasta College that provide support for degree pathway progress to increase degree attainment in our region. The ACE program is designed for students who have "some college, but no degree" and who want to work while attending college full-time to earn a certificate or degree within one to two years. The program allows students to complete compressed coursework on an organized completion timeline, which includes a fully online option. Students progress through each program as a cohort, which builds a support system for working adult students.

The BOLD program encourages students who complete their two-year degree at Shasta College to continue pursuing a bachelor's degree online at a partnering four-year institution. Students complete a one-credit online course through Shasta College each semester while working towards their bachelor's at the other institution, giving students access to Shasta College resources such as the tutoring center and library, as well as high-speed computers and technology support. For rural students, this "home base" approach while completing an online four-year degree, along with the support of fellow students in a cohort, seems to go a long way towards keeping this population engaged and on track to a degree.

ELKHART – In Elkhart, we developed the county-wide industrial manufacturing technician (IMT) apprenticeship program to help people develop skills and earn credentials that lead to additional career opportunities. After completing a combination of online and industry-based learning, the student becomes an apprentice graduate with the IMT designation. Ivy Tech Community College provides instructors and operates as the testing entity for the online coursework's required exams, and the student then receives the certified production technician (CPT) credential from the Manufacturing Skill

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Standards Council (MSSC). This CPT credential then converts to six credit hours should the individual enroll at Ivy Tech. Although the credential itself is noncredit, any student who wishes to study something technology-related at the college is required to take Advanced Manufacturing 101 and 102 and the CPT curriculum is already embedded in these courses. This helps articulate a pathway for students to further their education.

We also work to create high school-to-business pathways and to up-skill adults by getting them directly into Ivy Tech programs. We target high schools and speak with teachers and administrators about the pathways we are creating for high school students so they can graduate with workforce-ready credentials. We have over 200 apprentices registered with various

companies, and we have 250 high school students who took the related learning part of the program. All our high schools are eager to get their students involved in this form of work-based learning.

RIO GRANDE VALLEY – The dual-enrollment program in our region began at South Texas College in 1999 and while it has evolved over the past 20 years the overall goals have remained the same—to improve the college readiness of high school students and, in turn, increase college completion rates. We added dual enrollment academies in 2005, beginning with a medical science academy, which allows students to earn an associate's degree in biology while still in high school. As of 2019, there are now seven academies, including two that offer career and technical education (CTE)-based learning: cybersecurity and welding.

The students in the dual enrollment academies form a small cohort of around 300 individuals, in which students and their families have access to a parent-student orientation, individual advising, and weekly workshops

preparing them for their career field interests and their pathway to a university. We are proud to say that 100 percent of our dual enrollment students have transferred on to a university.

We also believe there's a very big difference between enrolling students and serving them. So, to best serve students, we developed a support system framework—a sort of "blueprint" that would outline how students would be supported from admission through to completion. Within this framework, we made many changes to our enrollment process, keeping in mind the unique needs of some of our students as low-income, Latino, and first-generation students. For instance, we focus on building college knowledge and familiarity because these students are often lacking information on those fronts. We work to empower our students, celebrate their successes along the way, and help them transition to college.

COLUMBUS – In Columbus, we developed the Powerhouse Credentials Crosswalk—a crosswalk of regional workforce needs, industry recognized credentials, and Ivy Tech Community College degree Pathways—to connect the postsecondary education our institutions offered with local workforce needs. First, we identified 30 high demand certifications in the areas of advanced manufacturing and healthcare, which are our region's major economic drivers. The Crosswalk then articulates a pathway from the initial certification to additional credentials and degrees that help a student with economic mobility. In practice, we use this cohesive framework as a tool for advising—helping us to coach a student and explain what may come next in their educational and employment journey. Some information already existed but it was siloed and consequently underutilized. Now it is organized into one place, which increases its utility and value.

IHEP: How are these strategies making a difference for the students in your community?

ELKHART – We know from our advanced manufacturing sector partnership that a credential such as the IMT provides real benefits to students and workers. Having a credential can increase the likelihood of getting an interview with a company; it could also mean getting hired at a higher rate of pay. For example, if a business is registered as an IMT sponsor, a high school student who has already completed the credential part

of the program could jump right into the apprenticeship and start learning the skills outlined in the competency book for that particular business.

One of our partners is the Labor Institute for Training (LIFT), which runs a Spanish version of the Certified Production Technician (CPT) curriculum, in order to serve the significant number of immigrants in Elkhart. We have

students who are English Language Learners with limited ability to read, write, and understand technical concepts in English, yet their level of prior educational and professional experience is amazing. Some of our students have received degrees in their home countries—for example, there is an electrical engineer in one class and a gynecologist in another. We are now in discussion about whether or not students should eventually transition into an immersive English program, especially because that is the environment they are going to end up working in.

COLUMBUS – In our region, adult education tends to serve a low-income population. The reason people want training or education is pretty simple—it's to get a better job or to get a promotion that leads to a higher paying wage. We see our strategy as fundamentally improving our students' ability to be self-sufficient and provide for their families.

RIO GRANDE VALLEY – The dual enrollment program has served as a key strategy to accelerate college readiness and college completion for high school students in our region. We demonstrate commitment to our community by waiving the tuition and fees for all students actually enrolled in dual credit classes at their high school. If a student chooses to take these same classes independent from their high school on the South Texas College campus, their tuition rates are also significantly reduced.

Since its inception in 1999, the dual credit program has served over 106,000 students and has saved them and their families over $200 million in tuition and fees. The program grew from serving 441 students in 1999 to serving over 4,800 high school seniors in spring 2019. What's more, when you look at graduation numbers, close to 1,800 students completed an associate's degree or long-term certificate in May 2019. Of those students, nearly 1,500 earned an associate's degree. This program has made a significant difference for our students.

SHASTA – In Shasta, we see higher course success, persistence and completion rates for ACE students when compared to non-ACE students. Even students taking ACE classes for convenience, but not officially as participants in the program, outperform the general student body. ACE students have a course success rate (grade C or higher) of 89 percent; 10 percent higher than the rate for all students. ACE students also persist at a higher rate of 73 percent, compared to 64 percent for the overall student population on campus; what's more is this rate has improved with each cohort since 2016. This data led to a cultural shift at our institution, where faculty now seek to work in the ACE program proactively. BOLD is still very new – we are in our third semester and our first students graduated in Spring 2019—so it will take a while to get data on results, but we expect to see similar growth in our course success, persistence and completion rates.

STRATEGY #3:

BUILD GENUINE PARTNERSHIPS WITH DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS ACROSS EDUCATION, WORKFORCE, AND COMMUNITY SECTORS TO DEVELOP COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS THAT ARE ABLE TO PUT STUDENT NEEDS AND INTERESTS FIRST, WHILE ALSO CONTRIBUTING TO COMMUNITY GROWTH.

IHEP: How would you describe the partnerships that are essential to your program's success?

COLUMBUS – Our (Powerhouse Credentials) Crosswalk was created by our guiding team of about 15 people across different sectors, so a community-wide partnership has been at the heart of our program's success. Case in point—all of our materials have many logos across the bottom, representing all of our partners. For instance, we work closely with three adult education providers in our region—McDowell, River Valley, and Jennings County Education Centers. We also partner with WorkINdiana through the Department of Workforce Development and Ivy Tech Community College. Another critical partner is Su Casa Columbus, a local non-profit that serves the LatinX community, which is one of our focus populations.

We collectively determined workforce needs using two sources of data—employer surveys conducted through the EcO Network and Indiana's Department of Workforce Development's job projections through 2024. It was also important to all of us that the training be free to the student, so we looked at certifications that had been approved and would be funded by the state. The last criterion was that almost every certification on the list should lead directly to college credit. The credit should ideally lead to a certificate and eventually even an associate's degree.

As we developed Crosswalk, there were three of us—a representative from Ivy Tech, a representative from adult ed, and an EcO Network representative—that would lock ourselves in a room for four-hour stretches at a time to dig through and draft all the documents. Our drafts were vetted by ten different faculty members on four different campuses; we then took the drafts to faculty and program chairs within each of those programs for their review. We also shared the drafts with employers and asked one central question: Does this pathway help you understand the education that your ideal hires would complete on their way to being employed at your company?

We are hopeful that companies will look at the Crosswalk and think about how it could be useful within human resources for employee recruitment and retention. Over the next year we will be working with key workforce partners to pilot ways the Crosswalk could influence their employee development programming.

Importantly, this partnership has built trust among our postsecondary institutions and they have experienced a significant shift in their mindset around collaboration. Whereas institutions used to compete for the most qualified students, they have now begun to view students with these certifications as a motivated population to recruit from.

ELKHART – In Elkhart there has historically been a disconnect between what educators think is needed for the workplace and what business leaders actually need. We are trying to turn that around through our partnership. Although Ivy Tech is a statewide organization, it helps that there is a certain amount of latitude at individual campuses to develop partnerships in ways that make sense for regional businesses. Increasingly we are seeing businesses learn that they need to partner with educators, rather than just be consumers of education, to really meet their needs.

A lot of educators are likewise interested in ensuring that their curricula and classwork provide students with skills that companies want.

This countywide effort has taken an incredible amount of work to build, with diverse stakeholders each having distinct responsibilities. For instance, the Horizon Education Alliance manages the IMT program and their adult pathways department handles coordination responsibilities. Ivy Tech, on the other hand, provides instructors, the testing facilities, and classes when needed, supplemented by companies' resources when feasible. Colleges and employers actually work together to make sure struggling students receive the necessary supports to succeed and they also provide safety nets to help students along the path to completion.

SHASTA – We are in far northern California, which is very different than typical places you might imagine when you think about California. The area is extremely rural and we serve five counties that have come together because we recognized that we can amplify our voice if we work together. Similarly, through our previous work with Lumina's Community Partnerships for Attainment initiative we realized we could have a greater collective impact addressing educational attainment issues if we all joined together. This realization gave birth to North State Together, a critical partnership that aims to develop county-based solutions within a regional framework for Shasta, Tehama, Trinity, Siskiyou, and Modoc counties.

Simply put, it is difficult to access post-secondary education in our region. Shasta College and College of the Siskiyous are the only options in the area, and both are public two-year schools. Because there are no four-year schools in the region, people would have to move to access further public postsecondary education. Moving is cost-prohibitive and overwhelming to our rural population, where many people are low-income and would be the first in their family to attend college.

Collaboration and partnership within the college is also necessary for the success of our programs and students. A previous study conducted by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) helped us understand that our campus needed a culture change to better serve adults; we needed to underscore that serving adults is important. For instance, the vice president of instruction, the financial aid office, and the dean of enrollment management were heavily involved in getting the ACE program launched, and connections through our

economic workforce development stakeholders are helping to further build out our partnerships.

Our faculty have been key partners in developing the ACE program. Our vice president of instruction was very effective in talking with faculty about shifting from full 17-week courses to accelerated eight-week options. Initially, part-time faculty members stepped up and agreed to try teaching the accelerated courses. As the program got off the ground, these same faculty and others found the ACE students to be motivated, focused, and able to draw from life experience. These student characteristics helped to generate goodwill among the broader faculty, who in turn talked about how working with these students reinforced their initial motivations for becoming teachers.

RIO GRANDE VALLEY – South Texas College has strong relationships with the districts we serve in Hidalgo and Starr Counties and we insist on meeting individually with each partnering high school. We know the importance of meeting one-on-one with our partners and sharing critical information that helps them to understand the type of program we want to offer. We believe in strong communication and frequent conversations—some good, some challenging—to ensure the continued success of our dual-enrollment program.

Within South Texas College the partnership consists of a key collaboration between Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Enrollment Services. As the dual credit program expanded, the South Texas College president and administration recognized that it would be crucial to identify one person to lead the effort and intentionally coordinate the partnership. The Dean of Dual Credit Programs is a new position that started in February 2018 to ensure that collaboration continues across the college. The Dean acts as liaison with the 24 school districts that we partner with and plays a key role in bringing new initiatives and programs to life that educators and employers identify as promising.

For instance, cybersecurity is an emerging workforce trend in our region that our school districts identified as a potential future program. To bring the program to life, the grants department at RGV Focus—a collective impact initiative in the Rio Grande Valley whose mission is to transform college readiness, access, and success—sought potential funding opportunities. The college then worked with department chairs and deans to ensure program quality, and our Dual2Degree department ensured the program is being advertised and communicated properly to our school districts.

The collaborative mindset—focusing on a shared goal and partnering—is what is unique and what has gotten us this far. There's a positive synergy and feeling that together we are doing something greater than any of us could do alone.

KATHY HUFFMAN,
ATTAINMENT NETWORK MANAGER, COLUMBUS, IN

Looking Forward

IHEP: What advice do you have for other rural communities who may be looking to adopt these strategies to better serve their students and meet ambitious postsecondary attainment goals?

COLUMBUS – Providing each partner with a seat at the table generates a huge amount of buy-in and increases overall commitment to the collaboration. Beginning an authentic partnership is not something that can be decided at a high level and filtered down through an organizational channel; the partners need to be at the table from the very beginning.

We use the Civic Lab stakeholder engagement process in everything we do, so we'd recommend that an institution or another group wanting to create a similar partnership think about their community operating system. Identify how all parties are going to work together and what common language needs to be developed. Many of our early conversations involved defining what we meant by postsecondary, stackable, and other related terms that you would think have a common definition at this point, but don't. Much of our work stemmed from using the stakeholder engagement process as the program was developed: Who needs to be at the table, what does the data tell us, what pilot project do we want to work on together, and what can we all do together that none of us can do by ourselves?

The collaborative mindset—focusing on a shared goal and partnering—is what is unique and what has gotten us this far. There's a positive synergy and feeling that together we are doing something greater than any of us could do alone.

ELKHART – For institutions, our advice would be to work with business partners to develop a plan of action –what to do and how to do it. For instance, start with roundtables to gain an understanding of the needs of the business, because it will be impossible to hit the mark without a clearly defined target. In order to really improve student and community outcomes, you need to have a thorough understanding of what the business side needs and then design your curricula to match.

For businesses, identify who you need support from internally. Often a high-level official must first approve the program. Then a second-level person operates as the program champion, removing roadblocks and resolving issues that could prevent the program from happening. At the granular level, an apprenticeship coordinator is the connector between human resources, the apprentice, and the academic institution.

Counterparts are then needed at the postsecondary institution—these partners could come from the registrar's office or the workforce alignment department.

Some businesses have never had an apprenticeship program, so it's understandable that they're often unaware of the steps involved. For our part in Elkhart, we put together a guidebook that helps businesses by providing a framework of action to follow. Building these partnerships takes work and is also dependent on relationships—it's the strong relationships that are key to program success.

RIO GRANDE VALLEY – We would say that continuous evaluation is key to sustaining a project over the long-term. Just because a program has launched does not mean that it is the perfect model. Continue to re-evaluate the program: develop success measures, track student performance, determine what additional supports are needed, and listen to how partners talk about the program. An important part of evaluation should include stakeholders and collaborators in the process, which for us were our school districts, students, counselors and administrators.

SHASTA – You should take advantage of the information and resources that already exist and that you have access to. You'd be surprised at how much useful information is already out there, waiting to be tapped. We've been fortunate enough to use existing frameworks and guidebooks and adapt programs to accommodate our students' needs. And don't be afraid to reach out and ask for more help! We are happy to talk with anyone who would like more support or wants to know more about resources that we are completely willing to share.

Lastly, pay attention to your data—our data were screaming at us! When you look at the equity gaps in your data, and really interrogate why they're there, you recognize that you have no choice but to move forward and do better.

CONCLUSION

The strategies employed by each of these Talent Hubs reflect the diversity of rural communities and are designed to help higher education better meet the needs of rural students. They bridge the literal distance to institutions by bringing education to students through technology and collaboration and create programs that foster a sense of belonging among today's rural students.

Each strategy opens up the promise of postsecondary education to communities that have been isolated from such opportunity for far too long. The strategies build intentional pathways between postsecondary institutions and employers to ensure that increased educational opportunities actually translate into meaningful employment and stronger communities.

None of these strategies would have succeeded without strong partnerships and stakeholder engagement in each community. All four of these Talent Hubs believe in meeting students where they are and underscore the fact that higher education should be more innovative in order to reach today's rural students.

Given the limited access to postsecondary education that the majority of rural students currently face, solutions such as these are needed to make access and success more equitable across the rural-urban spectrum in this country.

Acknowledgments

Talent Hubs are communities that have shown the ability and commitment to significantly increase college-level learning among residents of all backgrounds. Talent Hubs are officially designated as such by Lumina Foundation, with support from the Kresge Foundation.

To earn designation as a Talent Hub, each of these sites truly work as a community. That is, its businesses, education leaders, and civic organizations works as a unit to attract, cultivate, and retain skilled and knowledgeable workers. Aligned and organized around this shared goal, they create multiple ways for individuals to earn college degrees, certificates and other quality credentials beyond a high school diploma.

Each hub has a backbone organization – a nonprofit entity that organizes and coordinates the work of the various local stakeholders. The hubs span the country – from New York City to Shasta County, California; from St. Louis to the Rio Grande Valley, from Boston to Austin.

They serve various populations. Some focus on African-American residents, some on Latinos, others on American Indians. Some hubs are targeting traditional college students; others are zeroing in on older students who left school before finishing degrees. But all share a commitment to eliminating disparities in educational outcomes among students of color.

As part of IHEP's role in the Talent Hubs effort, IHEP documents the implementation of innovative policies and practices within Talent Hubs and develops tools to create and/or assess postsecondary policy with an emphasis on equity.

For more about the Talent Hubs effort, visit: https://www.luminafoundation.org/talent-hubs