

RuralAmerica

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All the feature articles in this issue deal with one theme—community colleges. Community colleges have gone through a half-century of significant change, evolving from liberal arts schools preparing students for 4-year colleges to schools more focused on technical and vocational training, often with missions explicitly oriented toward local economic development. Many classes have shifted from the daytime schedule typical of colleges to evening and weekend courses designed for working adults. These changes have been particularly significant for rural areas. Some 40 percent of all community colleges are in rural areas or small towns and, often, they are the only institution of higher learning in the area.

Stuart A. Rosenfeld, who put together the group of community college articles for this issue, introduces the topic in his first article. He traces the expansion of rural community college missions and the growing diversity of the student body, as colleges attracted more older, female, and minority students. In the 1980s, many colleges began to offer programs to meet the needs of small and medium-size enterprises, especially in technology. In the 1990s, the Internet influenced what and how colleges taught. Community colleges will be increasingly challenged by competition from other educational institutions (including web-based education), and will need to find ways to combine the broad scope of their missions with the focus necessary to fill the unique educational needs of their communities.

In his second article, Rosenfeld examines an alliance in Ireland between a technical institute (similar to an American community college) and a local development agency in the remote western village of Letterfrack. The two organizations created a new college within the institute to teach furniture making in order to bring that industry to Letterfrack and to strengthen the weak Irish furniture industry. The program has grown rapidly and the students have readily found jobs, but so far development benefits have been from the college itself rather than from the creation of local industry.

Sarah Rubin discusses the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI), a collaboration between a nonprofit research organization, MDC Inc., and the Ford Foundation, to explore the use of community and tribal colleges in poor rural areas as agents for development and improved access to education. Twenty-four colleges were chosen to participate in areas ranging from Appalachia to western Indian reservations. Each received planning grants and technical assistance as it formed leadership teams with both college and community members. The most successful schools strengthened regional leadership and forged closer ties with their rural clients.

Cynthia D. Liston and Linda L. Swanson examine whether successful community college strategies can be replicated by other schools. Using benchmark practices that were identified through a Fund for Rural America project, the article cites a number of success stories. The best practices included entrepreneurial training, alliances between the college and local industry, and programs that promoted the use of local amenities. Replicating strategies successful elsewhere can be a way for small colleges to avoid costly mistakes and to create networks with other colleges.

Rural Updates in this issue cover rural development policy, migration, earnings, and farm household income and wealth. Richard J. Reeder gives an overview of rural development policy and regulatory changes over the past year. Low-income areas stand to benefit from the Community Renewal/New Markets Initiative and the new Delta Regional Authority, a multi-State organization centered on the Mississippi River and comparable to the Appalachian Regional Commission. Infrastructure also got a boost last year, especially transportation and community facility aid.

John Cromartie reports on a significant shift in rural migration—in 1999-2000 the surplus of inmigration from metro to nonmetro counties reversed for the first time in a decade. Moreover, between 1998 and 2000, the nonmetro Midwest overtook the South and West as the region with the most inmigration. Migration by college graduates to nonmetro areas also dropped during that period. Robert M. Gibbs updates Current Population Survey data for nonmetro weekly earnings. Nonmetro earnings increased 9.8 percent between 1996 and 2000. These gains have been enjoyed by women and minorities as well as White males, and by workers in all educational groups. The share of nonmetro workers earning low wages has also fallen for all demographic groups.

Robert A. Hoppe uses ERS's 1999 Agricultural Resource Management Study to update farm household income. Farm households now earn average incomes some 17 percent higher than the U.S. average. Overall, only 10 percent of that income comes from farming, though this varies widely by farm size and whether farming was the farm owner's principal occupation. Off-farm income has become important even for households operating large farms.

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