

## RURAL POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION WHITE PAPER

*Prepared for the Resilient Louisiana Commission by the Rural Development Task Force*

*June 9, 2020*

### CHALLENGES

It comes as no surprise that a postsecondary education has become increasingly important for the economic stability and prosperity of a community and its citizens. However, state and federal policies and programs have largely ignored rural communities, thus creating unique challenges for rural school districts and postsecondary education institutions. As discussed in the K-12 white paper on Rural Education, rural school districts face unique challenges. Many of the K-12 challenges mirror those facing rural postsecondary education institutions including: lack of financial resources, difficulty in recruiting and retaining quality talent, geographic barriers, and access. Further exacerbating the challenges facing Louisiana postsecondary education is its exposure to budget cuts anytime there is a state budget shortfall. The bullets below provide additional details on the challenges to postsecondary education.

- **Lack of pervasive college-going culture.** Many rural postsecondary students are considered first-generation college students, meaning neither parent completed a bachelor's degree. US Department of Education statistics indicate that 38% of students pursuing a bachelor's degree today are the first in their family to attend college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). This creates a lack of "cultural capital" from which first-generation students can benefit. They lack family guidance, resources, and awareness of services that comes from having family members with experience who can advise them (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Even for those well-academically prepared students, the transition from high school to postsecondary can be challenging. Many first-generation college students are at higher risk of not moving forward and/or completing degree or certificate programs. The Higher Education Research Institute reports that only 27% of first-generation college students complete their bachelor's degree within 4 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). In 2014-2018 in Louisiana, just 14.7% of rural students 25 years or older completed college compared to 25.5% of urban students (US Department of Agriculture, 2020).
- **Lack of stable funding for higher education.** While K-12 funding in Louisiana is protected by the state's constitution, higher education and health care have no constitutional protection from budget cuts. These two critical areas become vulnerable any time there is a shortfall in the state's budget. With the current pandemic, states nationwide are seeing their tax revenue drop, forcing legislatures to look at deep budget cuts. According to Dr. Kim Hunter Reed, Louisiana's Commissioner of Higher Education, Louisiana's colleges have already suffered a \$97 million loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). While the CARES Act funding is coming to Louisiana, the losses continue to increase. This once again raises fears of severe budget cuts that continuously face colleges and universities in Louisiana.
- **Rural Brain Drain.** Rural communities are faced with many unique challenges. A decreasing population in many rural communities is a result of outmigration to more urban areas. Those who are talented, full of tremendous potential, and in search of economic prosperity are among those who typically leave their rural community, never to return.
- **Geographic Barriers.** Many rural communities do not have postsecondary opportunities available for their residents. This creates an issue of access for those who want to further their education. In Louisiana, higher education institutions are not evenly distributed across the state. In Northeast

Louisiana, for example, three of the state's 14 public universities are located along a stretch of just 30 miles (Crisp, 2016). Some argue that Louisiana has an overabundance of campuses which compounds its resource challenge. Florida, with a population of more than four times that of Louisiana, has 12 publicly funded four-year institutions as compared to Louisiana's 14. Many students are nontraditional, work full-time jobs, lack reliable transportation and need access to services that meet their needs and schedules. These students would likely be best served initially through a technical or community college. Louisiana has 13 technical community colleges under the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, plus two 2-year institutions housed within other management systems. These campuses are also not evenly distributed across the state, leaving some rural regions void of or lacking in postsecondary opportunities. Community and technical college access should be readily available in almost every parish of the state.

- **Postsecondary Education Governance Structure.** Louisiana's public higher education system is governed by one top higher education board, the Louisiana Board of Regents, and four separate management boards. Having independent management boards, along with all of Louisiana's higher education institutions, means paying more system and university/college presidents, provosts, deans, other administrators and facility maintenance. Years of budget cuts have forced multiple studies, proposals, and recommendations for the organization and function of Louisiana's higher education system. However, most have been met with controversy and have failed to gain political traction.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. INCREASED FOCUS ON ESTABLISHING A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE AND RECRUITING/RETAINING RURAL STUDENTS

Establishing a strong college-going culture will take years, if not generations, and involve the work of the entire community. Work with rural students must start as early as possible in their school career. Exposure to not only education programs and providers, but also to careers available in their home region, is essential. Also, a focus on adult education programs can largely impact the college-going culture of the region. As more and more adults return to school, the first generation college student population should diminish with time. Going to college becomes the norm. Organizations such as Career Compass of Louisiana can help fill the gap of the "cultural capital" absent from many rural communities.

An increased effort should be made to recruit rural students to postsecondary. Too many times, university and college recruiters visit the largest high schools, leaving out the smaller rural schools. This, in large part, has to do with years of budget cuts leaving very small university/college budgets for recruiting. Once these rural students do arrive on the college campuses, heightened efforts must be made to keep them there. Programs providing support for first-generation college students are critical to retention and completion. Colleges and universities must find ways to better recruit and serve rural students.

Emphasis on expanded dual enrollment and credentialing options for high school students must continue. It should become the norm for high school students to first enter their local community college and THEN matriculate to a university after having earned in excess of 45-60 hours. Universities should strengthen their partnerships with local community colleges to provide easy access to general education classes, via cross-enrollment, for those students who chose to enroll directly in a university. Universities should promote this opportunity to their students and parents.

## 2. FUNDING STABILITY AND SECURITY FOR POSTSECONDARY

Almost every year, Louisiana's higher education institutions are faced with not knowing if their budget will remain constant, increase or be cut. This makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to develop and sustain long-range plans. Higher education is much too important to the economic and workforce development of Louisiana for its leaders to have this worry year after year. Efforts should continue, and rise to the forefront, for the protection of this area in Louisiana's constitution.

## 3. DEMAND FOR EFFICIENCY OF OPERATIONS

As Louisiana's higher education leaders push for stable and secure funding, they must be held accountable and ensure they are providing the most efficient operations possible. With the lack of resources, and the sheer number of public postsecondary institutions, it is their responsibility to ensure that duplication of operations and programs does not exist. Redundancy must be eliminated and a focus should be placed on collaboration and sharing of operations. Rather than maintaining so many physical buildings, an emphasis should be made on a movement toward a learning center model. Several institutions can partner in a single location, where access and geographic barriers exist, to offer non-duplicative programs on non-traditional schedules with multiple delivery systems. Bring the programs to the rural communities, all under one roof. This provides cost effective delivery and increased access to the entire population.

## WORKS CITED

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018 February). *First-Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Postbachelor's Outcomes*. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018421>

United States Department of Agriculture. (2020 May). *Louisiana State Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from <https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?StateFIPS=22&StateName=Louisiana&ID=17854>

Inside Higher Ed. (2020 May). *State Cuts Grow Deep*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/15/size-state-budget-cuts-becomes-clearer>

Crisp, Elizabeth. (2016 February). *Are there too many universities in Louisiana?* Retrieved from [https://www.nola.com/news/education/article\\_166f2f1e-94f8-5a47-af9a-8b7373ee55ba.html](https://www.nola.com/news/education/article_166f2f1e-94f8-5a47-af9a-8b7373ee55ba.html)