BRIDGES Rural Design Insights

PART 1: Understanding the Potential of Rural Community College Learners

Design Insights — an Education Design Lab publication series
The Education Design Lab (the Lab) is a national nonprofit that co-designs, prototypes, and tests education-to-workforce models through a human-centered design process focused on understanding learners’ experiences, addressing equity gaps in higher education, and connecting learners to economic mobility. The Lab believes that human-centered design allows colleges and universities to map and galvanize their existing strengths to meet the needs of the students that they serve.

The Lab’s process also shows higher education leaders how to consider the needs of employers, using the curriculum and program design as a gateway to make skills more visible to students and employers alike.

Design Insights is a publication series designed to share insights from initiatives led and supported by the Lab as part of the Learner Revolution. This series offers a glimpse into the Lab’s human-centered design approach to make learning visible, portable, affordable, flexible, and relevant.
Introduction

Rural communities in the US are as diverse as the geographies they represent. The education-to-workforce pipeline plays a critical role in these communities. Supporting rural learners along this pipeline requires identifying the role that place has in the learners’ experience and how rural community colleges fit into the broader community. Education Design Lab (the Lab) is working with rural community colleges to produce new models that improve outcomes for rural learners and their communities.

This first brief, in a series of publications on this project, will introduce the Lab’s new BRIDGES Rural Design Challenge and make the case for greater investment in rural community colleges. As we explore key barriers and opportunities in rural communities, we offer early insights from the project that will be used to inform the development of new models for rural colleges. We explain how our approach, based in human-centered design, will build the capacity of rural community colleges to respond to their regional labor markets and enable greater economic agility for their learners and communities.
A New Design Challenge for Rural Community Colleges

“How might we strengthen the capacity of rural community colleges to serve as critical economic growth engines for their learners and communities?”

In April 2020, with support from the Ascendium Education Group, the Lab launched the BRIDGES Rural Design Challenge, a multi-year initiative, to answer this question. Five community colleges were selected from across the country to participate. Each college brought together a team to work as part of a broader cohort and received an initial grant of $20,000 to support their work.

1. College of Eastern Idaho
   Idaho Falls, ID

2. Eastern Maine Community College
   Bangor, ME

3. Finger Lakes Community College
   Canandaigua, NY

4. Washington State Community College
   Marietta, OH

5. Zane State College
   Zanesville, OH
The Future of Education: The Learner Revolution and New Majority Learners

The Lab embraced this project as a way to engage in the Learner Revolution and serve new majority learners in rural communities. The Learner Revolution is about changing the future of learning and work in response to the needs of learners, workers, and the evolving labor market. The future of education, training, and work lies with the working mother, the incumbent worker, the some-college-no-degree student, the entrepreneur, and other learner populations who have historically been excluded and underinvested in by higher education and other systems. These are the new majority learners whom the Lab orients our work around and designs with through our learner engagement framework.

Human-Centered Design

The Lab is leading the BRIDGES Rural cohort through a design-and-build process to develop outcomes-focused prototypes and pilot designs that are ready for implementation. Each pilot will be pressure tested against impact, learner and faculty buy-in, and potential for scale. Human-centered design enables us to better serve the new majority learners and enact the learner revolution.

1. Grounds us in the learner experience.

We root ourselves in the voices of learners through frequent feedback and perspective gathering. We bring learners directly to the table to be part of the design process.

2. Is based on a highly-structured methodology.

We utilize a four-phase model (described in the insert on the next page) that is personalized and contextualized to each institution.

3. Allows for flexible, rapid innovation.

Our methodology facilitates an ongoing cycle of learning, ideation, testing, and iteration. It leads to innovation, the fostering of connections between issues and solutions, and the potential to partner and serve in more effective ways.

4. Reflects our bias toward action.

We work with communities to envision tangible change. We help our partners get to results quickly in order to better serve learners.
APPLYING HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN TO BRIDGES RURAL

The BRIDGES Rural Design Challenge follows the Lab’s model of human-centered design. This model consists of four phases: understand, ideate, prototype, and launch.

Phase 1: Understand

This phase is about early data exploration to understand learners’ journeys. The Lab team engaged studio teams, conducted community-based research, and held convenings to establish the project’s scope and research protocols.

THE LAB’S DESIGN PROCESS

450+ learners interviewed

400 Gallery Walk Attendees

650+ other stakeholders engaged in research process

1850 Gallery Reflections
Unlocking the Potential of Rural Learners

The Lab brought together rural researchers, community college administrators, educators, and workforce development experts to explore early research findings and identify opportunity spaces where promising models can build on existing strategies. Studio teams surfaced vital insights, which led to early concepts for potential approaches moving forward.

Community-Based Research
The Lab conducted interviews and surveys with learners, faculty, staff, and community members across the five colleges in the cohort. Findings from this research were shared with stakeholders from across each BRIDGES Rural college, along with quantitative data on their local communities, economies, and institutions. This helped build a comprehensive understanding of learners’ experiences and contexts specific to each institution.

Convenings
Direct work with the five colleges began through a series of cohort and institutional meetings. These convenings focused on gaining empathy and recognizing assumptions. Institutional teams built on early themes generated through the studio teams and community-based research.
Recognizing the need to better understand rural communities sits at the core of this project. The Understand phase set the context for the work and learning that each BRIDGES Rural college would pursue to better support its community.

What is Rural?

Rural, as a place, is often determined through absence – what is left over after claiming urban, suburban, and metro spaces. Lacking a single, productive definition, rural areas are often lumped together and perceived as being one thing, when the reality is quite different. Furthermore, rural areas are assessed by standards and data that uphold urban life as the norm and which do not create space for rural communities to be distinctly recognized. This often results in rural voices and perspectives being left out of critical conversations or framed as reliant on their urban counterparts.

Rural communities make up a very large part of the country. Data from the US Census Bureau indicates that 60% of counties are mostly or completely rural. While only 14% of the country’s population lives in rural counties, that still equates to 42 million people.

Who are Rural Communities?

Rural communities are not a monolith. They are complex, spanning different types of communities across a multitude of geographical spaces and diverse populations. These communities differ by racial, economic, and other spectrums. They include communities with families who have been there for generations, and those with growing immigrant populations and transplants from other parts of the state and country. While each community has its own set of strengths and challenges, so does each demographic within the community.

The American Communities report identified nine types of rural communities: African American South, Aging Farmlands, Evangelical Hubs, Graying America, Hispanic Center, LDS Enclaves, Native American Lands, Rural Middle America, and Working Class Country.

Because rural communities are dispersed across a broad area, accessing postsecondary education is not easy. Roman Ruiz and Laura Perna note that in rural counties, only about a quarter of adults have an associate’s degree or higher. According to the Center for American Progress, the majority of counties in the bottom 10% for educational attainment are mostly or completely rural.
Barriers for Rural Communities

We learned about barriers facing rural communities through the studio teams, community-based research, and cohort convenings. While communities across America can face many of the same challenges, these hurdles are experienced differently by specific communities due to their local contexts. Understanding these barriers plays a key role in addressing the BRIDGES Rural design question of "How might we strengthen the capacity of rural community colleges to serve as critical economic growth engines for their learners and communities?" For the purposes of this project, technology, transportation, and infrastructure top our list.
High-speed internet infrastructure is one of the foremost challenges for rural learners and communities. The Center on Rural Innovation shows that on average, 39% of rural school districts lack broadband access compared to 10% of school districts in town, suburban, and urban areas. Rural community colleges often serve as a center for community members to access free, reliable, high-speed broadband, yet many learners do not have access to devices such as computers and printers.

The impacts of limited technology access have worsened due to the sweeping shift to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students in rural areas have struggled to participate effectively in their virtual courses due to a lack of sufficient internet access or necessary devices. Federal stimulus funds have been directed to address these issues, and institutions have quickly acted to provide more wireless hotspots and make tablets and laptops available to more students. In addition to students’ experiences, rural college staff and faculty have also struggled with a lack of access to high-speed internet and devices, and faculty faced the challenge of moving to online and remote teaching without proper training or professional development.

“Number one is access to the internet, the digital divide: we have some folks who don’t have the internet, we have some folks who don’t have computers, and we have some folks who have neither.”
- Rural Community College Practitioner

“Internet access affects everything from FAFSA completion to course selection.”
- Rural Community College Practitioner

**ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY**

Percent of Households in the Zane State College service area with access to technology:

- 83% of households have a computer compared to 89% of Ohioans.
- 74% of households have broadband compared to 82% of Ohioans.
Unlocking the Potential of Rural Learners

Transportation

Unlike urban and suburban areas, rural areas often do not have robust public transportation options for commuting. Reliable and affordable personal transportation can be a challenge, especially when looking at longer commutes to get to campus. A 2018 Urban Institute report found that 33% of residents in rural areas are located more than 25 miles from a college or university. Long commutes to and from school impact rural learners’ choices about attending college, as well as their experience in college.

“[I met someone last semester who was driving over an hour to campus four times a week. She did not understand that she could take classes online. But, after the first semester she figured it out and is doing all classes online, which is great because she was really worried about the roads in the winter.]”
- Rural Learner

“During harvest and in the winter, we are subject to road conditions that don’t allow for easy travel.”
- Rural Learner

“Students who don’t have access to public transportation are asked to travel 20 to 50 miles to take a class.”
- Rural Community College Practitioner

GETTING TO WORK (an example from Zane State College)

18% drive over 50 miles to work

35% work outside their county of residence

27 mins The average commute to work is

89% of households have a car available compared to 92% of Ohioans

Infrastructure

Rural communities and colleges tend to have less concentrated infrastructure than other places in terms of buildings and other physical spaces. As a result, community members and learners may experience greater constraints and fewer options in many different parts of their lives. For instance, learners in rural areas may not have as many choices for how, when, and where they learn, due to distance to campuses and facilities available. Access to resources and services, such as healthcare, may be more limited.

“Medical services don’t reach much beyond the towns. I can drive 40 minutes south or 35 minutes north for primary care. There is nothing in between.”
- Rural Learner
Emerging Opportunities for Rural Communities

The growth of remote career and training opportunities and the shift to a skills-based economy are emerging trends that hold potential for rural communities and rural colleges seeking to become economic engines in their regions. Federal investments also show promise of significantly benefiting these communities.

Growth of Remote Career and Training Opportunities

Employers need more talent. With the rise of remote working, location does not matter as much as it used to. As such, employers are viewing rural populations as prospects for talent. Industries hiring for remote positions range from customer service to software and IT, healthcare, and more.

Additionally, industry players and learning providers are partnering more frequently with institutions to expand training options for learners. More virtual and non-institutional offerings are becoming available, such as associations providing online courses, vendors offering bootcamps, and employers providing certificates. These options can increase the capacity of rural institutions to expand their program offerings and reach more learners through online or hybrid options.

GROWTH OF REMOTE CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Here is a list of top industries showing strong remote job growth, according to FlexJobs, along with current job listings and annual salaries for companies that are hiring right now.

CUSTOMER SERVICE
- Customer Success Associate: $40K-$50K
- Family Advisor: $60K-$65K
- Nonprofit Resource Navigator: $46K-$50K

MEDICAL & HEALTH
- Clinical Research Physician: $272K
- OPIC Improvement Facilitator: $66K-$74K
- Curriculum Planner - Dental Business Education: $50K

COMPUTER & IT
- Website Support Specialist: $104K
- Data Analyst: $50K-$60K
- Head of Engineering: $80K-$130K

EDUCATION & TRAINING
- Senior Manager of Education Content: $60K
- Supervision Manager: $75K
- Organizer Training + Development Coordinator: $95K

Shift to a Skills-Based Economy

As business and industry shift to a skills-based economy, there is a need to represent learning through the language of skills and competencies. More institutions are beginning to offer micro-credentials as a way to chunk learning and more specifically identify skills and competencies that learners have developed. When developed in collaboration with employers and stacked together as part of for-credit offerings, these micro-credentials can be used as a validated market signal to quickly connect learners to employment in high-growth, family-sustaining careers in which they can continue to grow. Micro-pathways, for example, being co-designed by the Lab and partner institutions participating in the Community College Growth Engine Fund, can be a vehicle for rural community colleges to better connect labor supply with talent demand by making learning more visible, stackable, portable, flexible, and affordable.

MICRO-PATHWAY DESIGN PROCESS

1. Experience Market Demand
Use labor market data and employer input to determine in-demand occupation.

2. Determine Skills & Competencies
Elicit skills and competencies needed by employers.

3. Design to Learner Needs
Discover and determine learner needs from direct inquiry.

4. Test & Iterate Prototypes
Test and iterate prototype pathways with all stakeholders.

5. Marketing & Business Model
Test and iterate on program designs marketing strategies for pathways.

On ramps: Making sure that learners get into pathways through marketing and PLA
Off ramps: Working with employers to get learners into jobs into jobs that align with their pathways and goals

6. Finalize Pathways
Finalize pathway components into a digitally discoverable and learner accessible format.

The American Rescue Plan and the American Jobs Act

With significant federal funding for postsecondary institutions, learners, and states on the horizon, rural colleges and communities will be positioned to rebound from the effects of the pandemic and propel themselves forward with improved infrastructure and technology, as well as more emergency aid for students. There will also be greater demand for training related to the American Jobs Act. This funding shifts the landscape for rural institutions, which typically operate on a fraction of the resources of their urban and suburban counterparts, and will enable them to serve their students and communities in ways that increase their impact.
Phase 2: Ideate

This phase of the design process translated the empathy and knowledge gained through the Understand phase into concrete ideas. BRIDGES colleges participated in gallery walks, gained a crisper sense of design criteria, and began to develop early concepts for testing and further iteration.

**THE LAB’S DESIGN PROCESS**

**Gallery Walks**

Each institutional team came together for a second convening to gain deep and direct exposure to their learners and local context. Participants moved through gallery walks focusing on learners’ experiences, institutional perspectives, and the community and economy. They reflected on quantitative data, insights, survey responses, and quotes from interviews with learners, faculty, staff, and community members. From participants’ insights on the gallery artifacts, teams started to form ideas that could help them address the design question.
During their gallery walks, each BRIDGES team collected insights shared by diverse stakeholders as they reflected on hyper-local quantitative data and qualitative data gathered from interviews and surveys of hundreds of community members. Each institution is using these insights to shape the development of their prototypes and pilot designs, which will be discussed in the second brief in this series. The following design insights from BRIDGES Rural shape our understanding of rural as place and community. From these insights, we highlight opportunities noted by the colleges and their stakeholders as they formulate models for their prototypes and pilots.
Design Insight #1: Rural Communities Demonstrate a Deep Commitment to Place

Rural communities show a strong commitment to place. The Pew Research Center found that about half of rural residents have lived in or near the same community for their entire lives. They often value the safety of their region, the orientation around family, their relationships with others who live there, and the beauty of their location. Rural individuals express a desire to contribute to their local community’s growth and sustainability. Many rural learners want to build lives in communities where they will feel supported and have the chance to give back so their communities continue to thrive.

OPPORTUNITY FOR DESIGN INNOVATION:

Many rural community members, in their commitment to place by marketing their programs, services, and resources as being directly connected to place and the value of the local community. Colleges can connect to learners in the K-12 space much earlier to help them experience the benefit of further career development at the community college level. Specific credentials that can be earned in high school and built upon at the community college can create earn-and-learn incentives to see postsecondary education and training as a key part of ensuring rural community members have opportunities to stay and thrive.

““There is great pride in small town family heritage.””
- Rural Learner

““There is a strong sense of community here.””
- Rural Practitioner

““Rural students often have that attachment to place, wanting to stay in their home communities, they have to make a choice about leaving or staying.””
- Rural Practitioner
Design Insight #2: Experiences of Belonging Vary within Rural Communities

Rural community members, in their commitment to place, identify deeply with their communities. Compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, they more frequently know and are known by their neighbors and the people in their towns or regions. Rural community members share that people are more friendly and engaging than in non-rural regions. This sense of belonging, linked to place, can be very strong.

However, not all those who live in rural communities experience such belonging. While rural communities can be highly diverse, racial inequities and underinvestment in diverse rural communities can lead to deep divides and some community members not feeling embraced for all of their intersecting identities. New majority learners, those for whom college was not designed and whom have been historically excluded - Black, indigenous, and learners of color, LGBTQ students, those who are parents, people with disabilities, those who are experiencing poverty or are first in their families to attend college, and others as well, may experience a sense of otherness within their rural communities and colleges. As in all parts of the country, systemic inequities can limit opportunities and create barriers to work and learning. For new majority learners, seeing others like them succeed in college and in the community becomes very important for establishing their sense of belonging, as does intentional investment by colleges in building inclusive, antiracist cultures.

OPPORTUNITY FOR DESIGN INNOVATION:

To cultivate a deep sense of belonging for all learners, colleges must consider the intersectionality of learners’ identities — race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, physical and cognitive ability, hometown, immigration status, family structure, native language, and more affect individuals’ experiences with power, oppression, and belonging. The following starter recommendations can help colleges begin to build a more welcoming environment for learners of many different identities:

- anti-bias training for all institutional staff;
- hiring and retaining faculty and staff of color, LGBTQ+ identities, and those with disabilities;
- recognition and credit for learners’ work and life experience;
- highlighting success stories for learners of diverse identities and backgrounds; and
- supportive advising, mentorship, and community building.

It can also be helpful to use design tools that provide colleges with a means to analyze learning environments and programs through the eyes of different learner personas or groups, for example through “journey mapping” their experiences to “walk in their shoes,” informed by the perspectives and experiences of learners of focus. Institutions can look to organizations like Creative Reaction Lab, Equity Meets Design, the National Equity Project, The Education Trust, and members of the Equity Design Collaborative for learning and capacity-building opportunities related to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice.
Design Insight #3: Rural Communities Benefit from Understanding their Constituents

Because rural communities are so spread out, rural colleges often serve learners from multiple communities across a broad geographic area. The population makeup of these communities can vary in aspects such as income levels, racial and ethnic diversity, and local industries. Institutions may not be aware of the full diversity of their potential learners across these different areas, especially with immigration and domestic migration shifting the make-up of rural populations. COVID-19’s economic impact has also affected industries in ways that may necessitate people shifting careers, making some workers potential learners who colleges may not have focused on in earlier times.

Additionally, rural areas can often get clustered in with nearby cities, making it difficult to access locally-specific data. Communities whose experiences get lost in this aggregate data may face barriers to understanding the bigger picture of economic trends, community needs, and how specific populations are faring compared to others. This lack of data about rural communities, when combined with external misperceptions hoisted on them from those outside the community, can lead to challenges for community advocates or to initiatives that attempt to solve perceived problems rather than those actually most salient.

OPPORTUNITY FOR DESIGN INNOVATION:

Rural community colleges can serve as champions for growing and changing communities across their service areas. They have a role to play as advocates and designers of programs, pathways, and services that connect people in historically underinvested communities with opportunities to meet their goals or address training and employment needs in a particular county or for a specific employer. Human-centered design approaches can help colleges better understand the experiences, identities, and goals of their current and potential learners so they can respond to these and support their communities in creating the futures they envision for themselves. The concept of “designing at the margins” can further deepen their impact. When a program or service is designed for a specific group of people who previously may have been excluded or underinvested in, all learners often benefit from the innovation. COVID-19, for example, forced colleges to create more online programs, which in many cases have brought about greater access for those who needed more flexibility before COVID, such as working students, those without transportation, parent learners, and some learners with disabilities.
Design Insight #4: Education May Be Seen as a Value and a Threat in Rural Communities

Rural communities recognize the value of education in helping community members access relevant opportunities and reach their goals. However, postsecondary education can sometimes be perceived as pulling family members away from their connections to and responsibilities at home.

**OPPORTUNITY FOR DESIGN INNOVATION:**

Demonstrating the alignment of individuals’ and families’ goals with opportunities available through higher education is crucial for building community buy-in and enthusiasm about going to college. Rural community colleges can address the idea of education as a threat by finding more ways to connect education to work, streamline pathways and timeline to completion, and help learners begin to earn a wage while learning. By focusing on programs that lead to living wage careers they can pursue locally – or those with ample remote work opportunities – and getting the word out to community members about the learning and employment options available to them in the area, colleges can market their offerings as supporting a commitment to place.

“I feel like all of my experiences here [at my institution] are leading me to where I’d like to be and places professionally that I never expected.”
- Rural Learner

“There is a higher ed stigma for many families in this area. Students struggle with remaining loyal to their families and finding meaningful employment in the area. Families fear that education will cause students to leave the area to find a better life, which is threatening to the local culture.”
- Rural Learner
**Design Insight #5: Future Efforts Should Be Built from the Strengths of Rural Communities – with Rural Community Colleges at the Center**

Rural communities enjoy many strengths, such as their commitment to place, tightly knit networks, and family support, which should be celebrated rather than overlooked or downplayed. Recognizing community assets like these opens the potential to build on these strengths so colleges can better serve their communities.

Rural community colleges, which are often located in the center of large geographic areas, have the opportunity to become hubs for connection both within their local communities and across their regions. Through offering and connecting people to resources, services, and work opportunities, rural institutions can increase the capacity of communities to support themselves. While the spread of students across a large geographic area could be seen as a challenge, rural colleges can orient around this factor as a strength and develop learning options that are more flexible to better serve many learners across their regions.

Strong relationships between people in rural places can help support rural colleges’ efforts as well. For example, rural colleges can leverage and deepen their relationships with employers embedded in their communities to create and unlock new learning and career opportunities for community members, increasing the impact of industry partnerships. Models and strategies that work elsewhere may be applied to the rural context, yet efforts that capitalize on what exists and respond to the local community may be more effective.

**OPPORTUNITY FOR DESIGN INNOVATION:**

Rural community colleges are the regional “Talent Advocate” for current and future learners throughout their academic and career journeys. Teaming up with local workforce development agencies and aligning to economic development investments, colleges can define talent assets and develop pathways that are localized to the specific needs and opportunities of their communities and build off the strengths of their local industries. Through collaboration with regional governments and community-based organizations, they can more effectively support basic needs services and provide additional resources to learners and the broader communities they serve.
Going Forward

Through BRIDGES, we are learning to understand rural places and people and how to use this recognition to develop innovations that address the unique goals and needs of each community. Over this next year, the Lab will continue to explore and co-design with our five BRIDGES Rural community colleges as we collectively strive to realize the potential that institutions like these have to catalyze economic opportunity and improve outcomes for rural learners and their communities.

To follow along with our BRIDGES Rural work, follow us on Twitter @BridgesRural for frequent shareouts from our BRIDGES Rural learnings and @eddesignlab for general Lab updates and opportunities to connect.

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