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WEST VIRGINIA'S CLIMB

ALYSSA RATLEDGE

A Statewide Education Collaboration That Centers on Rural Communities

MDRC, Ascendium Education Group, and Rural Matters partnered to present a four-part audio series called “Rural Higher Education: Challenges & Opportunities,” which aired on the [Rural Matters podcast](#). This supplementary paper summarizes Part II of the series.

In 2018, West Virginia higher education leaders set an ambitious goal: Ensure that 60 percent of the state’s working-age adults have [postsecondary credentials by 2030](#). Why is this so ambitious? As of 2016, fewer than one-third of West Virginians had an associate’s degree or higher. Competing in the modern economy [increasingly requires a postsecondary education](#). And for many West Virginia communities, a college degree can be a stepping-stone out of poverty.

WHAT IS WEST VIRGINIA’S CLIMB?

[West Virginia’s Climb](#) is a campaign to improve college degree attainment across the state, from cities and towns to rural communities up and down the Appalachian Mountains. Including rural areas has been a key element of the campaign since its inception: Many of the state’s lowest-income and most rural counties are also those with the lowest levels of educational attainment. West Virginia’s Climb includes five strategies:

- 1. Educational resources:** Offer freely accessible, openly licensed textbooks for a wide variety of courses to dramatically reduce students’ textbook costs.
- 2. Emergency aid grants:** Provide small stipends, usually in the range of a few hundred dollars, for students potentially derailed by an emergency expense such as a car repair.
- 3. Tools of the trade:** Give grants to students in workforce programs where the tools necessary to participate can be prohibitively expensive, such as welding equipment.
- 4. Advising:** Provide schools with financial support for additional advising interventions and support, with a focus on rural students’ unique needs.
- 5. Student-facing services:** Assess services like enrollment and financial aid — essential connections for students trying to enroll in and persist in college — to identify institution-wide improvements and customer service strategies that better meet student needs.

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WHY THESE STRATEGIES?

[Research has shown](#) that a number of short-term interventions can help low-income college students succeed. Providing financial support for expenses not fully covered by financial aid such as textbooks, tools, and transportation can help students stay enrolled in college semester to semester. Offering emergency aid for small, one-time expenses such as a car repair or last-minute babysitting is a low-cost way for colleges to keep students on track. Improving advising and other campus services to provide students with additional, personalized support — for example, by reducing advisors’ case-loads and by using insights from behavioral science when contacting students about school requirements — has also been shown to improve students’ likelihood of reenrolling. Advising interventions such as these are especially effective, research shows, when they are combined with other services and financial supports to help students navigate multiple issues simultaneously.

Strategies like these have been widely studied in low-income and first-generation college populations. But in West Virginia, the additional dimension of students’ rurality has meant having to customize the interventions to suit local needs. For example, colleges can partner with nonprofits to provide services on campus that rural students might otherwise have to travel long distances to access, such as childcare or mental health counselling. Schools can also provide internet access for students whose homes do not have broadband. The West Virginia government has already instituted a “last dollar” [financial aid program](#) for many two-year college programs in which the state covers any gaps between students’ federal financial aid and tuition and fees. West Virginia’s Climb takes the next step to ensure that students’ needs beyond tuition are met, too.

HOW DID WEST VIRGINIA’S CLIMB COME TOGETHER?

In 2018, the Education Funders Affinity Group of [Philanthropy West Virginia](#), a statewide network of grantmakers, met to discuss and prioritize ways in which members could collaborate to improve college graduation rates in the state. From there, the group broadened its effort, engaging the [West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission](#) as well as representatives from colleges, state agencies, nonprofits, the private sector, and local community members at an education summit. Building trust and identifying common goals among the diverse group of stakeholders was critical to the success of the effort, participants said. Doing this in advance meant that when national philanthropic partners came onboard to move West Virginia’s Climb forward, the group had already identified local needs and community members felt heard, trusted, and connected.

The discussions reflected the participants’ belief that rural equity matters. Making sure that representatives from rural communities, nonprofits, student groups, and schools were full partners was essential, participants said, because they represented some of the highest-need areas in the state. As a practical matter, this meant colleges inviting their local industries and nonprofit partners to participate, students identifying their greatest needs via student surveys, and foundations of all sizes pooling their resources into larger funds to build collective capacity. That way, the participants con-

cluded, rural lived experiences and community needs would be baked into policy prescriptions from the start.

HOW CAN YOU TRY THIS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Start by assessing students' needs. If tuition is paid for, as it is in West Virginia, but textbooks and supplies are not and may be unaffordable for students with low incomes, add financial support to cover those costs. If enrollment rates are low, revise the new-student experience and improve essential student-facing services like advising, to address the reasons people are dropping out. From there, identify partners outside of the local college who can support the intervention further — through advocacy, funding, or in other ways.

Involve local community leaders in the design and implementation of a new program. Rural colleges may not have the means to sustain programs long-term by themselves — even when the programs work. That means state agencies, philanthropies, and researchers should include local partners from education and industry in intervention design and consider long-term engagement, to ensure their efforts are relevant, effective, and sustainable.

Higher education in sparsely populated rural areas has been historically underfunded. But because dollars can go further in rural communities, the potential for scaling up customized interventions is greater. West Virginia's Climb offers a promising blueprint.

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And check out the [Rural Matters Podcast](#) to learn more about this and other innovative programs serving rural communities.