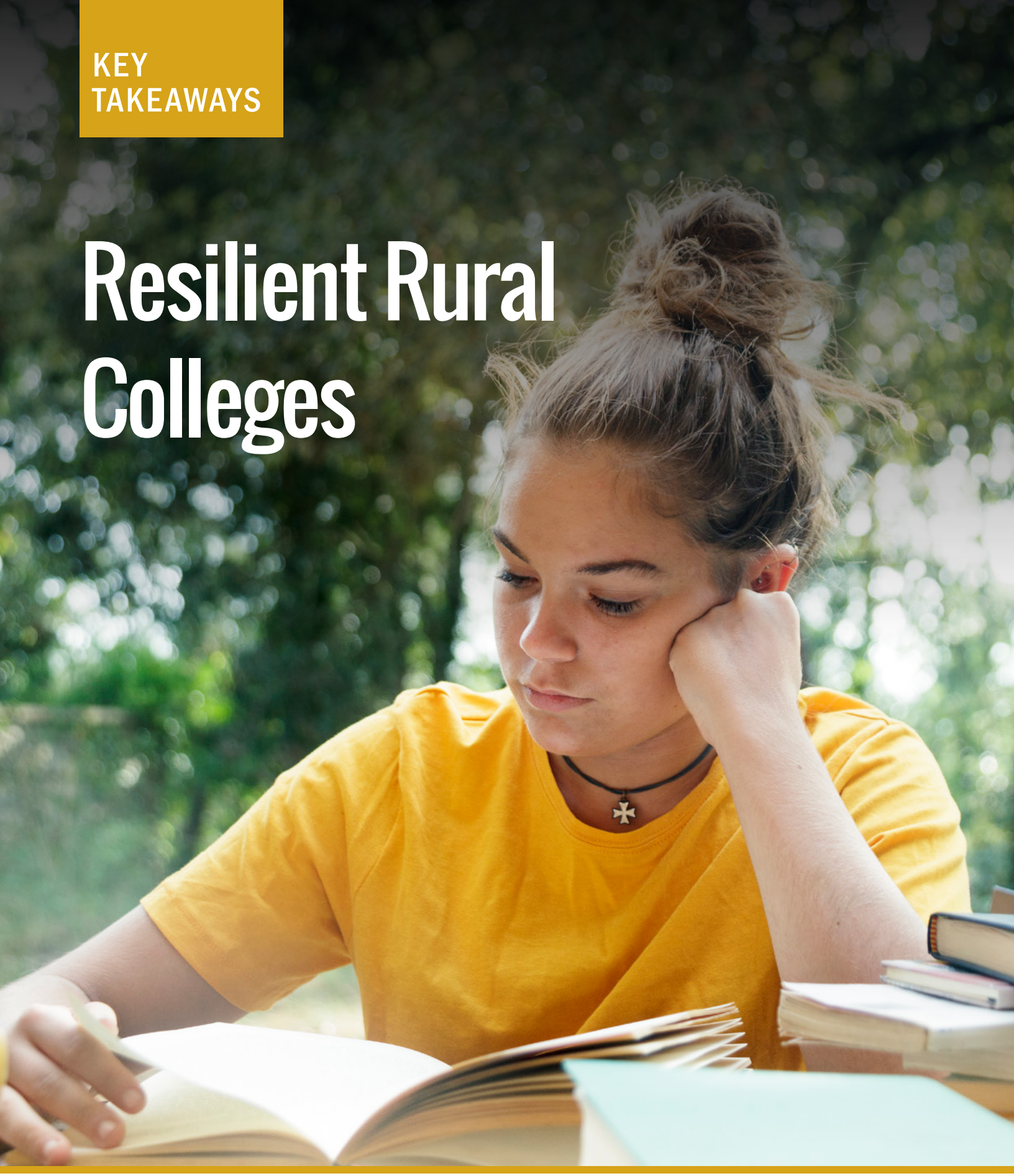
KEY TAKEAWAYS

Resilient Rural Colleges



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Before the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, colleges in rural America already faced financial and enrollment hardships. The pandemic and its economic impact have increased those challenges for these institutions, which sometimes are the only higher-education outposts within their local towns and surrounding communities.

But even as the pressures have grown, rural colleges are finding ways to be resilient, recruit more students, and bolster their bottom lines.

To learn about what strategies are working, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on October 14 convened a virtual forum, "Resilient Rural Colleges," with support from the Ascendium Education Group. The forum, moderated by Danielle McLean, a *Chronicle* staff reporter and author of a recent report, **"The Road Ahead for Rural Colleges,"** included Charles (Monty) Roessel, president of Diné College, in Arizona; Henry W. Spaulding II, president of Mount Vernon Nazarene University, in Ohio; Vicki Hawsey Karolewics, president of Wallace State Community College, in Alabama; and Mary Holz-Clause, chancellor of the University of Minnesota at Crookston.

The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, **access the archived version here.**

Danielle McLean: Henry, what have you noticed about the enrollment trends over the past decade? And what have you done to recruit new students?

Henry W. Spaulding II: Simply put, the biggest trend is that students are harder to get and more expensive to teach and support when they get here. We make sure that our recruitment and admissions team are well equipped and well informed, and we also worked to produce new academic programs that would invite new students in. We already had nursing, but it had not been approved by the Ohio Board of Nursing. It has been now, and has become our largest major. We've added health sciences, and that's one of our fastest growing majors.

McLean: Monty, what are those challenges like for tribal colleges?

Charles (Monty) Roessel: One of the biggest challenges, of course, is socioeconomic here on the Navajo Nation. We have 30-40 percent of our residents without running water or electricity. Unemployment is around 40 percent, even pre-Covid. So that type of environment makes it hard. What we did initially was make a deeper analysis of what are the programs that are of interest to students and what does the Navajo Nation need?

One of the things about tribal colleges is that we are building nations. That moves us away from this idea of a transactional degree where someone comes in, gets a degree, and gets a job.

Danielle McLean,
***Chronicle* staff reporter and author of the report: "The Road Ahead for Rural Colleges"**

Charles (Monty) Roessel
President of Diné College

That helps us take the long-range perspective.

For this current year, we offered a 50-percent tuition grant for all enrollees. That helped us to keep our enrollment even. But one of the biggest challenges we have, like many rural areas, is that students don't have a lot of role models around them who went to college. So creating a first-time college experience needs to combine culture and support that is beyond the usual academic support. It's more about building a community.

McLean: Mary, your institution has been trying hard to try and recruit students from underrepresented communities where it typically hasn't. What does it take?

Mary Holz-Clause: Like Monty and Henry said, it's finding out what is your specific area that you have a competitive advantage. We see ourselves as being a regional economic-development tool in the education ecosystem. And we have the highest proportion of first-gen students in the University of Minnesota system.

What we tried to do is start going back into seventh, eighth, ninth grades and create pathway programs. We began to work with high schools through camps during the summer. We're really beginning to develop this pathway program, but we see that's where our future is.

We can help Native American students when they are done with their two-year degrees at the tribal schools and want to finish up with a four-year degree. And other groups that traditionally have not gone to college see this as a welcoming place, a place where they can envision themselves.

McLean: Vicki, Wallace State has also been trying to recruit first-generation students.

Vicki Hawsey Karolewics: First-generation students are the majority population at many community colleges, so recruiting that population is not different for us. We've done everything that we've always done except we're doing it on steroids right now.

I want to go back to your first question, Danielle, if I may. And that is, what are our enrollment trends? I've been president of Wallace State since 2003. In my 17 years, our enrollment has not dipped below what it was when I first arrived — until this semester. There's a sense of alarm around that because we don't know quite what the future will hold.

McLean: Could better access to technology help?

Karolewics: Yes, advanced technology would help bridge those barriers because at the far reaches of our service area, it takes a student more than an hour to commute to campus. A lot of our residents, even if they had transportation, don't have the income to support the commute to and from campus. So, yes, technology

Henry W. Spaulding II
President of Mount Vernon Nazarene University

Vicki Hawsey Karolewics
President of Wallace State Community College

would be a great tool to overcome those barriers. But because we're a rural area, broadband is not fully available. The pandemic has really illustrated the challenges so many members of our rural communities face, because we had to push everybody into a virtual world and they can't get online.

Roessel: Too often, we think, boy, if we just had the technology, then everything would be solved. And it's just a tool.

We're now looking at what's the opportunity to reframe education and reimagine what it looks like on the reservation. Let's get away from "this is mine, that's yours." Let's look at this in a holistic perspective. Taking K-12, taking tribal colleges, taking state institutions, taking private colleges, and say, OK, how can we address the needs of the students? Can each of us contribute to the solution?

Too often we are just looking at our enrollment. And that sets us up in a bad situation because then we say, Our enrollment is down? We're failing. Our enrollment is up? We're doing OK. We should be looking at the local economic development and the community in totality. What does that look like?

We're looking at providing microcampuses throughout the 27,000-square-mile reservation. We have six sites. If a student doesn't have access to a class at their home, they could come to our microcampus and join a class offered by us or Arizona State, or the University of Minnesota, or another college. That is important in how we're looking at higher education, not just the horse race of higher education.

McLean: Henry, Mount Vernon has invested a lot of money and resources into improving the downtown of its local community in Ohio. What are the benefits of that?

Spaulding: About two miles from this campus is downtown. We had a program there in art, then added nursing and health sciences, and most recently our engineering program. All those occupied buildings that were in some state of disrepair. We went in with the assistance of a donor and our own funds to renovate them to first-class operations.

We feel like the city is deeply invested in us, and our faculty and our administrators are invested in it. They serve on the Rotary and the United Way; they coach rec leagues; they serve on community councils. We're integrated into the community in a way that they're invested in our interest. And we try to listen to them. If I picked up the phone, the mayor would answer and talk to me.

We felt like the progress downtown helps. For example, we have outside artists coming in and displaying their work in our space. It gives us a cultural center and an economic boost downtown.

Mary Holz-Clause
Chancellor of the University of Minnesota at Crookston

McLean: Vicki, how do you determine what academic programs should be adjusted or added?

Karolewics: The three most important things that community colleges can do are: One, assess your college or programs in your community. Two, plan strategically. And Three, understand how the nature of work is changing.
We're always studying data and collaborating with our partners. One of our partners is the Alabama Trucking Association. Not long ago the CEO of the organization indicated that when you think trucking, you think a shortage of commercial truck drivers, right? But there's a whole other support system that goes along with the trucking industry and one of those is diesel technicians.

We looked at that data, and we have very few programs for these technicians statewide. So I committed to him that we would develop a diesel-by-distance program. To take that program to scale, we are converting all of the competency development to virtual reality so that the students' presence on our campus is kept to a minimum.

Clause: We also listen to what the business and industries are saying in the area. For instance, we did an extensive survey and talked to several hundred of our industries to find out what their needs were. And then marry that with the data. What is the Department of Labor data saying, for example? Another piece that's been helpful for us is all of our majors and all of our various disciplines have what they call a citizens' advisory group or an industry advisory group. They meet several times a year and give us their feedback. They look at our curriculum. Maybe our curriculum needs tweaking or updating. It also creates an opportunity for partnerships. Oftentimes, tweaking a program comes at a cost, so that provides an opportunity for philanthropy.

Also, every one of our students either has to do an internship or do a senior science or research project. Having our students working like that and having our students involved and engaged with helping us determine what the needs are in the industry helps. Because you can have these wonderful programs, but if you're not able to recruit students to enroll, then that's wasted resources. It has to be a marriage of both student interests and demand of the industry.

McLean: Looking ahead, what are rural institutions doing today to prepare for the next five years?

Clause: Be strategic. Oftentimes when we're in difficult times like right now, people tend to bury themselves. Instead, what we need to do is look at the opportunities. We have to prioritize, because everybody's resources are much less than they probably were six, eight months ago. But yet what are those new areas that we can start? And then what are those ones that we need to stop?

This "Key Takeaways" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.

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