



EDUCATION POLICY CENTER
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

KEY FINDINGS:

- More National Council of State Directors of Community Colleges members report great fiscal strain than in any year since the Great Recession.
- Of 45 reporting states, all 40 reporting strain indicate fiscal strain includes their rural community colleges.
- Among the 1,002 community colleges in 2013-4, 159 received <15% of their total revenues from state appropriations, another 91 received <10%, and 59 received <5%.
- Greater dependence of community colleges on tuition revenue means that cuts in federal Pell aid result in commensurate declines in enrollments, tuition revenue, and, over time, graduation rates.
- National averages of percentages from local sources mask great differences.
- Cuts in state aid have exposed cracks in 1960s enabling laws.
- Federal policy should require states to maintain operating support as a condition to receive Title IV student aid.

ON OPPORTUNITY'S FAULT LINE: THE PRECARIOUS NATURE OF RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE FINANCE

An Issue Brief for the Rural Community College Alliance

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INTRODUCTION

Why do a record number of state community college leaders report that rural community colleges face great fiscal strain (Figure 1)? And why has the problem worsened at rural community colleges during the economic recovery, despite the increased need for access to associate degree programs and the more expensive, high-skill training programs business and industry demand? How can state and federal policy help these engines of rural regional innovation lift up America's most precious asset, its human capital?

We believe the financial challenge community colleges face today is tied to the long-term decline in state investment. Divestment dates to the 1980s, decades before the first White House Summit on Community Colleges and the involvement of the Lumina and Gates Foundations. In 1980-81, 55% of U.S. community college students enrolled were in one of the 22 states that provided 50% or more of total funding for their community colleges. By 2000-01, this was down to 8% in 7 small states.¹

Our analysis of the 1,002 urban, suburban, and rural community colleges reporting financial data to IPEDS in 2013-14 reveals that 159 institutions received 15% or less of their total revenues from state appropriations. Another 91 received 10% or less of their total revenues from state appropriations, and 59 received 5% or less. *This startling finding directly challenges those who argue enough money is already being spent, if only if it were better deployed.*

Declining state funding has changed the social compact between states and the local boards of trustees responsible for governing community colleges. Seven decades after the 1947 Truman Commission challenged states to make the 13th and 14th years geographically universal,² deep state funding cuts have changed the basic rules of the game.

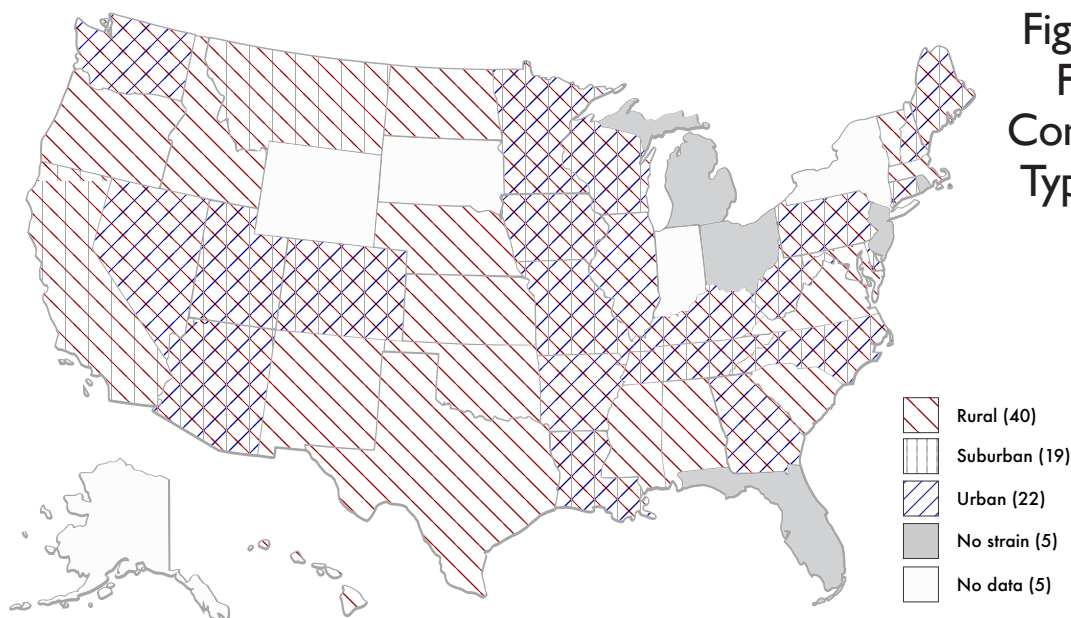


Figure 1: Predicted
Fiscal Strain by
Community College
Type in FY2015-16

Source: EPC analysis of State Higher Education Executive Officer's FY2015-16 predictions.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES FACE FISCAL STRAIN

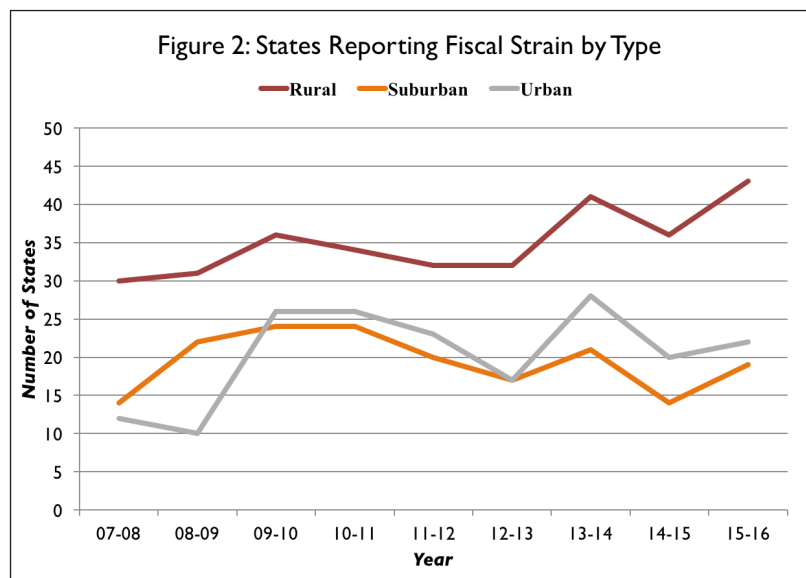
Figure 2 shows that *all* types of community colleges — rural, suburban, and urban — are predicted by state-level community college leaders to face great fiscal strain. **More members of the National Council of State Directors of Community Colleges (NCSDDC) report great fiscal strain at their community colleges now than in any year since the Great Recession.**

Community colleges thus face a double-whammy: cuts in state appropriations for operating budgets and federal student aid that result in declining enrollment and, consequently, tuition revenue. The Education Policy Center's annual surveys of NCSDDC members reveal the deep operating budget cuts *followed* the end of federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act stimulus funds.³

In June 2012, to stem a projected \$2 billion shortfall in the popular federal Pell Grant program, Congress and the Obama Administration approved new Pell eligibility restrictions. Community college enrollments across the country immediately declined in 2012-13. The impact on rural community colleges was severe: in the three Deep South states of Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi, an estimated 17,000 community college students lost Pell Grants in 2012-13.⁴ That community college graduation rates began to fall two years later — the exact opposite of that for which a college success agenda should aspire — did not surprise NCSDDC members.

LOCAL FUNDING MATTERS

The situation is critical at the nation's 613 rural community colleges, which have always lacked basic economies of scale (Figure 3). Financing is also acute at the 39 urban and 87 suburban community colleges in the 25 states whose community colleges receive less than 10% of their total revenues from local appropriations. *At these institutions, the local share is typically near zero.* Miami-Dade College, an urban-multi-campus community college in south Florida, provides a good example: for-credit enrollment grew from 71,665 in 2000-1 to 88,170 in 2008-09, and, with federal one-time summer Pell funding, it jumped to 95,862 in 2010-11. But with flat or declining state aid, rel-



atively flat federal student aid, and no local tax support, Miami-Dade College's enrollments fell in 2012-13, 2013-14, and again in 2014-15. In 2012-13, the state appropriated \$137.7 million, a figure far exceeded by the \$175.5 million generated in student fees.⁵

Lumping all community colleges into a single category, as most of the national data sources do, presupposes sameness and actually obscures reality. In truth, significant variation exists among and across community colleges reporting data to the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. When a national average percentage of total revenues from local sources is published, it masks great differences: it typically approaches zero for nearly all of the 557 rural, suburban, and urban community colleges in the 25 states with no local funding and/or where local funding provides less than 10% of all revenues, and can easily exceed 30% at the 445 rural, suburban, and urban community colleges where local revenues exceed 10% of total revenues.⁶ Within the locally funded states, we see rising intrastate inequities at community colleges resulting from a property tax-based higher education funding model. In the 25 states with little-to-no local funding, community colleges charge tuition far higher than the average Pell grant, and often, higher than the maximum Pell grant (such as in Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Vermont).

As Figure 3 shows, tuition represents a substantially larger percentage of average total operating and nonoperating revenues at community colleges without local funding; there is a missing leg to the three-legged stool.

Figure 3: The Impact of Local Appropriations

Revenues (as average % of total operating & non-operating revenues)						
2010 Carnegie Basic Classification of Associate's Colleges		Number of Colleges	Local Appropriations	State Appropriations	Tuition/ Fees	Combined "Big Three" Revenue Sources
Rural-Small (<2,500 students)	With Local Support > 10%	35	25%	27%	13%	65%
	Without Local Support	77	2%	42%	15%	59%
		(112 Total)	-23%	15%	2%	-6%
Rural-Medium (2,500 to 7,500 students)	With Local Support > 10%	95	26%	22%	15%	63%
	Without Local Support	194	2%	35%	18%	55%
		(289 Total)	-24%	13%	3%	-8%
Rural Large (>7,500 students)	With Local Support > 10%	77	28%	21%	15%	64%
	Without Local Support	51	2%	32%	21%	55%
		(128 Total)	-26%	11%	6%	-9%
Suburban, Single Campus	With Local Support > 10%	59	25%	22%	20%	67%
	Without Local Support	46	3%	37%	23%	63%
		(105 Total)	-22%	15%	3%	-4%
Suburban- Multicampus	With Local Support > 10%	59	35%	17%	15%	67%
	Without Local Support	41	1%	32%	27%	60%
		(110 Total)	-34%	15%	12%	-7%
Urban- Single Campus	With Local Support > 10%	14	24%	21%	20%	64%
	Without Local Support	17	1%	32%	21%	54%
		(31 Total)	-23%	11%	1%	-10%
Urban- Multicampus	With Local Support > 10%	87	30%	23%	11%	64%
	Without Local Support	39	2%	29%	24%	55%
		(126 Total)	-28%	6%	13%	-9%
Baccalaureate/ Associate's Colleges	With Local Support > 10%	4	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Without Local Support	21	1%	35%	27%	62%
		(25 Total)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Two-Year Under Four-Year	With Local Support > 10%	8	14%	34%	9%	57%
	Without Local Support	39	2%	36%	20%	58%
		(47 Total)	2%	36%	20%	58%
Primarily Associate's Colleges	With Local Support > 10%	7	32%	20%	16%	68%
	Without Local Support	32	0%	35%	28%	63%
		(39 Total)	-32%	15%	12%	-5%
ALL	With Local Support > 10%	445	28%	22%	15%	64%
	Without Local Support	557	2%	35%	21%	58%
		(1002 Total)	2%	35%	21%	58%

Source: EPC analysis of 1,002 community colleges reporting data in the U.S. Department of Education / Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Finance Module in 2013-14.

CRACKS IN FLAWED ENABLING LAWS EXPAND TO CREVASSES

The policy choice by states to renege basic funding commitments in turn has exposed flaws in 1960s-era state enabling laws.⁷ For example, Ohio's 1961 enabling law essentially prohibits single elections for local tax appropriations across its multi-county community college districts, all of which are in rural areas. Similar issues can be found in states including Texas, Missouri, Florida, Alabama, Minnesota, and New Mexico. These cracks have expanded into crevasses — and they impact rural community colleges far more than their urban or suburban counterparts, as Katsinas, Opp, and Alexander noted in their 2003 MDC, Inc., issue brief.⁸

There has been a general lack of interest regarding community colleges on the part of major foundations whose grant-making has driven much of the college success agenda. The last major foundation program for rural community colleges, the Ford Foundation's Rural Community College Initiative, ended in 2002. With the passage of provisions for rural community colleges within the Agricultural Act of 2014,⁹ the time is ripe for sustained federal involvement.

THE PROBLEMS ARE NOT NEW

A large body of scholarship documented the deep appropriations cuts in state funding for public higher education. In 2006, Ehrenberg noted that, despite a 50% increase in enrollments since 1974, “the share of state funding going to higher education has declined by more than one-third during the last 30 years” (p.xiii).¹⁰ The reports of the Delta Project on Postsecondary Education Costs, Productivity, and Accountability clearly show tuition has replaced state funding.¹¹

Hal Hovey, a former state budget director in Illinois and Ohio, predicted in 1999 that many states would face structural deficits due to changing demographics (i.e. an elderly population in need of Medicaid services) that would challenge their ability to maintain investments in public higher education.¹² Hovey's prediction is borne out by the data. Our annual surveys of NCSDCC members shows Medicaid cost increases ranked among the top three budget drivers each year since 2007.¹³

Increased state spending on health care is a primary reason why public institutions of higher education have received a smaller proportion of state budgets in recent years. It is no accident that between 1996 and 1999,

when Medicaid costs increased at or below the inflation rate, states were simultaneously able to cut taxes, increase K-12 investments, and increase spending for public higher education (Katsinas, 2005, p21).¹⁴

“The share of state funding going to higher education has declined by more than one-third during the last 30 years.”

— Ronald G. Ehrenberg

THE DOUBLE-WHAMMY

The greater dependence of community colleges on tuition revenue means that cuts in federal Pell aid result in commensurate declines in enrollments, tuition revenue, and, over time, graduation rates. The very title of the 2013 Report of the Century Foundation Task Force on Preventing Community Colleges from Becoming Separate and Unequal, *Bridging the Higher Education Divide, Strengthening Community Colleges and Restoring the American Dream*, speaks to the crisis.¹⁵ Mullin, Baime, and Honeyman in their 2015 book *Community College Finance: A Guide for Institutional Leaders* aim their work toward leaders and boards to give perspective on the funding shifts and new financial models.¹⁶ In their 2015 book, *Financing Community Colleges: Where We Are, Where We're Going*, Romano and Palmer ground their work in an economic perspective.¹⁷ But in these three excellent works, no data are presented that identify a key difference in community college type as suggested in 2003 by former American Association of Community Colleges President George A. Boggs and AACC Senior Research Associate Kent A. Phillippe regarding the presence or lack of local tax support (p.81).¹⁸ As Figure 3, shows, declining state support for operating budgets following the Great Recession has been especially harmful to community colleges with no local funds.¹⁹

How does this critical policy difference in local/non-local funding identified by Boggs play out in practice? First, our analysis of NCSDCC responses shows more community colleges in the 25 states with substantial local funding took cuts — and deeper percentage cuts — than in the 25 states without. This was true in the recessions of both 2002 and 2008-10.²⁰ If responsibility to fund the 13th and 14th years belongs to local rather than state governments, it is apparently easy to justify state-level cuts in community college operating budgets.

Consider the case of Texas, which appropriated 76%

of the full community college funding formula in 1990-91, 71% in 2000-1, 52% in 2004-5, and 37% in 2012-13.²¹ When then-Governor Rick Perry vetoed \$154 million in community college funding in 2007, he was trying to shift responsibility to fund legally-required health and pension contributions for community college faculty and staff to local boards of trustees. Perry argued community colleges were creatures of local government and not the state.²² In 2000, Texas' strategic plan for public higher education, *Closing the Gaps 2015*, proposed increasing postsecondary enrollment by one million students in fifteen years, most of whom would be attending community colleges. A chancellor of a large urban multi-campus community college district told one of the authors it was an attempt to shift the cost of educating Texas' fast-growing Hispanic student population from state to local taxpayers.

State funding cuts since the Great Recession (Figure 4) have hit rural community colleges hard. At rural Southwest Texas Junior College on the Mexican border, enrollment grew even as state funding fell from \$10.1 million in FY2008 to \$8.1 million in FY2013.²³ Six hundred miles away at Clarendon College in the Texas panhandle, where population growth and enrollments are flat — a situation common across much of rural America — the college has seen cuts approaching 30% over the same period. In fast-growing states where enrollment growth outpaces appropriations, if enrollment remains flat the state share likely falls. The practical burden of paying for increased en-

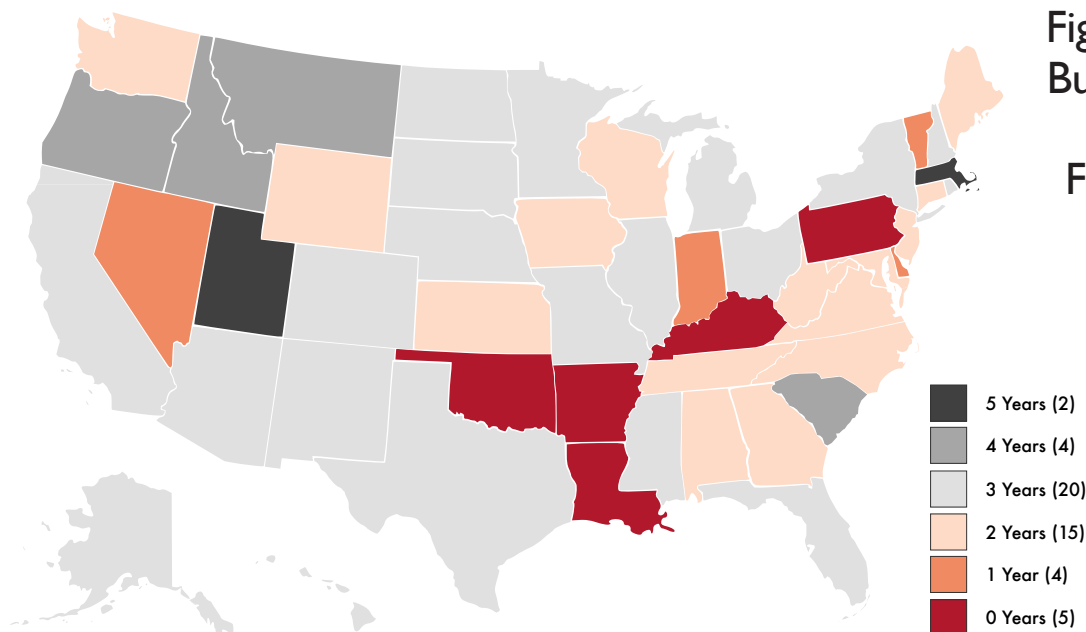
rollment will either fall on students and/or their families through tuition increases, or local taxpayers through higher local property taxes. The vision of states assuming responsibility to fund universal geographic access proposed by the Truman Commission has been turned on its head.

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WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The single most important federal policy lever available, maintenance of effort (MOE), has already demonstrated itself to be successful. The Education Policy Center's January 2016 report, *After the Great Recession: Higher Education's New Normal*, found the deepest cuts in state appropriations occurred in FY2011, after federal stimulus funds ran out. But the EPC's National Access and Finance Surveys show that MOE worked in FY2009 and FY2010 to tamp down state operating budget cuts for community colleges and the tuition increases at double or triple the inflation rate that often accompany them. The result was that the increased federal Pell Grant investments starting in 2007 under President George W. Bush that accelerated in the

**Figure 4: Operating Budgets vs. Inflation
FY2011-12 to
FY2014-15 actual,
and FY2015-16
predicted**



Source: EPC analysis of State Higher Education Executive Officer's actual reported state appropriations for FY2011-12 to FY2014-15. FY2015-16 data is predicted.

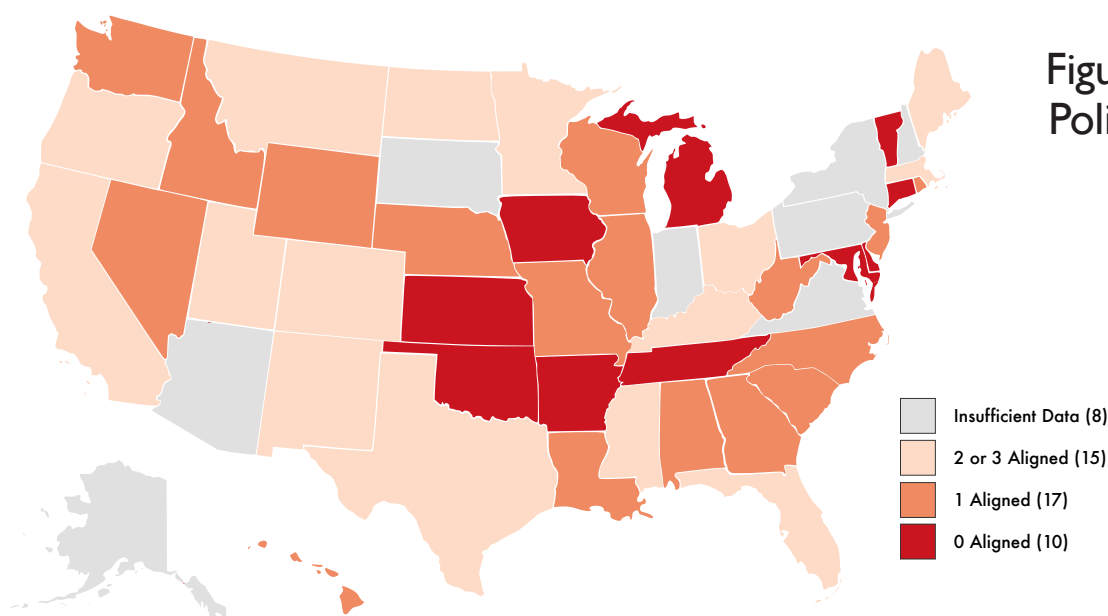


Figure 5: Predicted Policy Alignment in FY2015-16

Source: EPC analysis of State Higher Education Executive Officer's actual reported state appropriations for FY2011-12 to FY2014-15. FY2015-16 data is predicted.

first term of President Barack Obama produced dramatic increases in community college enrollment. But Figure 6 shows that today, most states lack policy alignment of their state appropriations, tuition, and state student aid policies. State cuts make it hard for increases in federal Pell Grant vouchers to have a positive impact on enrollment, retention, and success.

Thomas Mortenson has documented that at current rates of disinvestment, states will be completely out of the public higher education business in a little over a decade from now. This is why the American Association of Community Colleges,²⁴ the American Association of State Colleges and Universities have argued for maintenance of effort provisions.

A second potential area of cost-effective involvement is to require the use of geographically-based classifications of community colleges. The urbanicity definition of community colleges (Figure 7) lumps data from community colleges in mid-sized cities like Peoria with Chicago, and Eugene with Portland. This runs contrary to the state-assigned missions to serve the rural people that such colleges actually enroll (Figure 6). The U.S. Department of Agriculture in particular, with its substantial Economic Research Service function, should be encouraged to provide data that accurately describe reality.

CONCLUSION

A new social compact is needed. As Heller suggests, the very terms “affordability, access, and accountability” themselves are code words with definite political connotations that change over the decades.²⁵ This is why a renewed federal role is critically important.

Prior to 1960, municipally funded community colleges were common, and many of our nation's largest cities lacked community colleges altogether. The disinvestment by states may well indicate a move back to those dark times. Lower enrollment will have to result in lower graduation rates, as documented by our February 2015 study, *A New Way Forward Is Needed to Jump-Start Degree Completion*. The federal government certainly has the right, if not the responsibility, to insist that states make long-term plans to finance the operating and capital budgets needed to provide access and success for their

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*F. King Alexander, President,
Louisiana State University*

community colleges. This should be a condition of receiving federal Title IV student financial aid. That just one in four states have such plans now is troubling.²⁶ As Louisiana State University President F. King Alexander suggests, “the time is now for us to create a new federal/state funding partnership initiative at the federal policy level to match what our states are putting back into higher education and to incentivize them to increase their levels of support.”²⁷

Figure 6: Associate's Colleges in the United States According to the 2005 Basic Classification of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

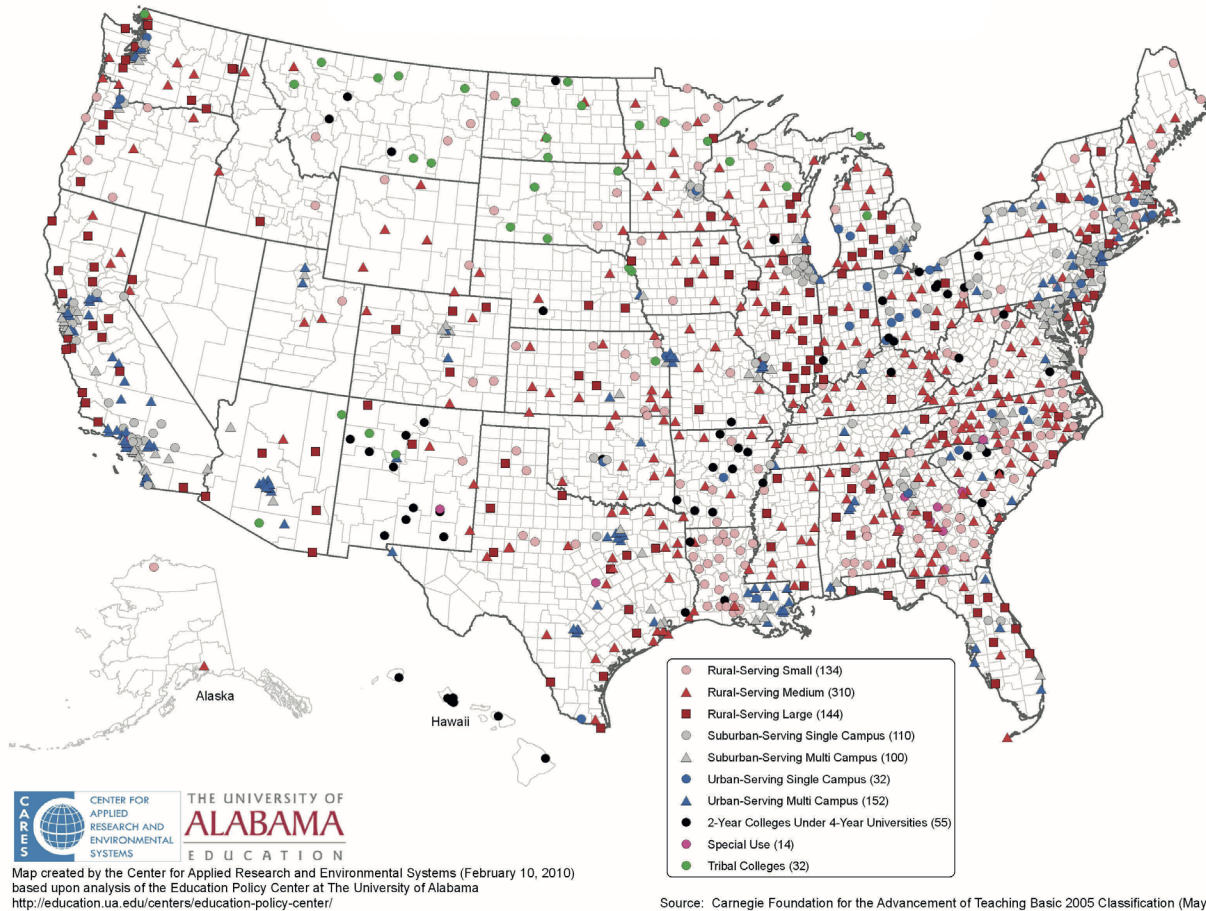
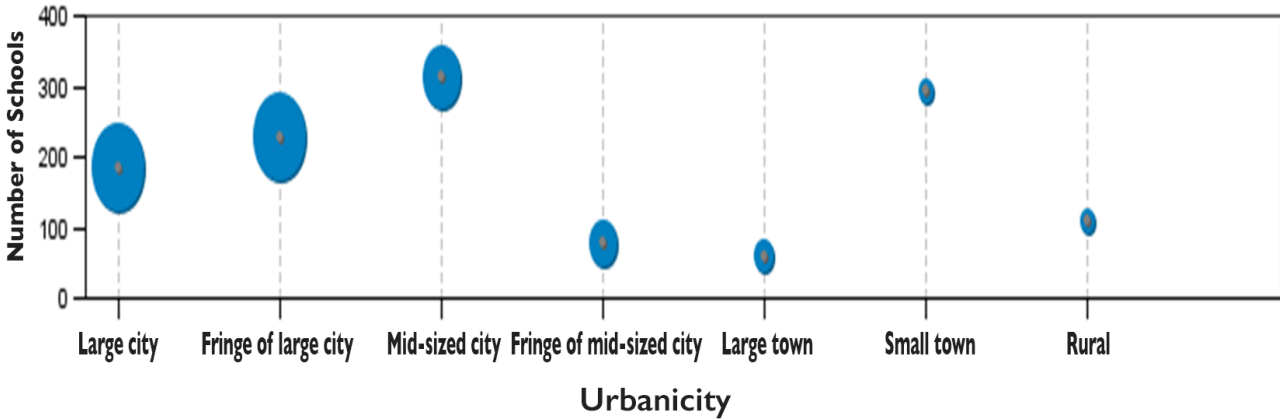


Figure 7: Number of Colleges, Urbanicity, and Institutional Size (Bubble Represents Average Enrollment)



Source: 2003 U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

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National Council of State Directors of Community Colleges Access and Finance Surveys: see www.uaedpolicy.ua.edu/access--funding-surveys.html.

Rural community colleges: The Center hosts the Rural Community College Alliance's webpage, as it fulfills its role as RCCA's research arm.

History of education research: More Than Science or Sputnik, the National Defense Education Act, by Center Associate Director Wayne J. Urban, published in 2010. Urban is now completing a biography on former Harvard University Pres. James Bryant Conant.

Student access research: Since 2010, the Center has published 19 studies on Pell Grants, and student aid issues.

The University of Alabama Superintendent's Academy, a partnership with the Alabama State Department of Education, broadens the pool of diverse, well-prepared leaders for Alabama's 137 public city and county school districts.

Public access colleges research: The Center's work on Associate's Colleges classifications is included in the 2005 and 2010 Basic Classification published by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, included in all federal education data sets.

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