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The MidSouth  
Partnership  
for Rural Community Colleges



## How Rural Community Colleges Develop Their Communities and the People Who Live in Them

*A policy brief by the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama for the MidSouth Partnership for Rural Community Colleges*

By Michael T. Miller, Ed.D. and Courtney C. Tuttle

### Executive Summary

The quality of life in rural America has a great deal to do with the opportunities rural citizens have. These opportunities include the professional work place as well as culture, exposure, access, and a sense of community. State and local governments invest heavily in the formation of an economic livelihood for rural societies, but rarely invest in the less tangible area of social development. In specific, the personality characteristics and identity of individuals in the rural setting are often at odds with attempted economic development initiatives, meaning that while big or small business or manufacturing can be lured to rural areas, rarely is the work force prepared, either in terms of technical skills or in terms of attitudes and beliefs about work ethic. Therefore, the preservation of rural America is strongly linked to the government's ability to provide opportunities for a satisfying and meaningful quality of life. Few state agencies exist that are locally placed that can serve to influence the perceptions and identity of rural citizens (Killacky & Valadez, 1995). The potentially strongest agency to influence the livelihood of rural communities is the rural community college. These institutions provide workplace skill instruction, occupational training, literacy instruction, liberal education, leisure education, and transfer education. And while these areas of instruction and work are directed at specific outcomes, their actions also have a secondary, less intentional yet strong result in the form of influencing how rural citizens see themselves and the pride they have or do not have in rural life. The current study was designed to explore how rural community colleges impact and influence the self-identity development of their rural citizenries.

Using a structured case study approach, the study of three rural community colleges in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama found that unintentional activities that draw family and community members to "the college" typically have a scaffolding impact on other family and community members, and that this impact largely has a positive influence on the rural citizenship. Specifically, those living in communities with rural community colleges are likely to want to remain in the rural township, have a strong sense of pride in the community and the college, and are willing to invest in actions and programs that improve the quality of life in these rural communities.

The implications of these findings are that policy makers at the state and local level need to support a variety of programs in the rural community college. These programs should be focused at both the postsecondary level and in community education. The impact of state and institutional investment in community education programs, ranging from summer camps to literacy instruction, improves the quality of life in these rural areas that has a subsequent impact on community stability and economic potential, both key factors in reshaping the rural mid-south as a healthier economic and business environment where rural communities thrive.

### Introduction

Rural community colleges have consistently been applauded for their work with economic development and job training activities (Rubin, 2001). Their role in helping to build a community's infrastructure has been based on tax revenue generation and job training opportunities, both activities that are often measured in economic terms. These rural colleges play another important role in their host communities: they define and enable individuals to identify who they are and who they are as a collective entity. To an extent, rural community colleges play an enabling role in self-identity development, particularly in areas of self-efficacy. Although some suggestive work in this area has been done in profiling rural high schools, there has been no attempt to work with any type of rural higher education provider.

Self-identity development is an important aspect to community growth and subsequent economic development (Appiah, 2005; Miller, 1991). Conceptually, the ability of an individual to see him or herself as an individual worthy of contributing to society and as a productive member of a business or industry is often self-fulfilling. In many poorer economic areas, sustained poverty and reliance on state and federal welfare programs is a learned behavior, that is, generations of parents and children see and depend on a life of entitlements. To a large extent, many areas of the mid-south have struggled with a model of economic vitality for the past 140 years. The response in some cases, as in Alabama, has been to lure big manufacturing, such as car assembly plants (such as the Mercedes Benz facility in Vance, Alabama) with tax incentives. At the same time, many small manufacturing facilities, particularly those small textile plants in rural Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas have struggled, and have been losing in cost competition with foreign labor (Beaulieu, 1998; Gibbs, 2001).

Research has consistently shown that models of economic development based on business and industry growth are tied to workforce capabilities. This study particularly suggests that a precursor to workforce preparation and success is the mentality and self-identity necessary for success in the workplace (Miller, 1995). Further, the rural community college is a mechanism that has a tremendous ability to influence the attitude and self-identity of potential workers (outside of the home). The difference between the community college and other state agencies is subtle: community colleges receive mandates, funding, and opportunities from the state as compared to locally funded and directed initiatives. If the rural mid-south is truly interested in transforming impoverished communities into culturally and economically rich communities of opportunity, then state governments must look to attitude and identity changes first, and then to providing workplace and other economic outlets that can capitalize on a workforce that wants to be productive.

Data for the study were drawn using a case study approach to identify and describe how rural community colleges help individuals determine their own self-identity and reflect the collective identity of those living in the town. Three institutions were selected based on willingness to participate and were identified with the help of the leadership of the Mid-South Partnership for Rural Community Colleges. One institution was in north central Alabama, one in southern Mississippi, and one in northern Arkansas. All three institutions worked to schedule interviews with students, faculty, staff, community representatives, and local business, civic, and non-profit leaders. As shown in Table 1, a total of 79 interviews were conducted. In most cases, notes of each interview were made, but ten interviews were also tape recorded and transcribed. This transcription as then compared to the notes taken from those interviews in order to assure an accurate process of interview recording.

Interview questions were developed in consultation with experts on rural development and the community college. These descriptive questions were also pilot tested at a non-participating community college, and revisions were made to ensure that the questions allowed for adequate and meaningful feedback. All interview data were collected throughout the 2004-2005 academic year, and interviews were both tape recorded and conducted with note-taking. Additional documents and artifacts were collected from each of the three rural community colleges in the study, including yearbooks, fact books, institutional research data, tourism and real estate materials, catalogs, etc.

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## Background of the Project

To better understand the potential impact that rural community colleges might have on individuals, it is helpful to explore the notions of identity development, the current situation for rural community colleges, and the role these rural colleges play in serving as a catalyst for rural living.

### Identity Development

The notion that an individual defines and develops a sense of individual identity was first explored by Erikson (Underwood, 2005). Working from his initial concepts, the idea of an individual identity has been identified as a “primarily unconscious process that unites personality and links the individual to the social world” (Josselson, 1987, p. 10). The process for creating an individual’s identity has consistently been viewed not as an isolated incident or as something static, but rather as an on-going process of building

for hosting a community college. A strong level of pride also existed in the Arkansas college, but in Alabama and Mississippi, these colleges provided the primary fuel for community pride. In each, the community’s sense of self worth was clearly tied to the college. This was evident not only in the comments, the t-shirts and bumper stickers proclaiming love for the college, but also the packed basketball arenas and football stadiums that swell when their local community college teams are winning.

Further research into the identity development and the preservation of identity levels is necessary and could be an important activity for an economic development commission. Research that focuses on the points of interaction between the college and various civic offices and officials could reveal stronger connections between the college and its host community. Research of this nature should also be expanded to include more colleges in a variety of community settings to develop more generalizable findings and to validate the power of rural community colleges. Finally, further research might take the form of round table discussions and critical elements of community college community interactions might be cataloged to examine specifically how they improve their host communities.

Finally, data identified in this study suggest that a college’s image is largely the sum of various parts. This means that community interactions and perceptions of the college are interlaced with state and local policy makers, external bodies and stakeholders, and internal stakeholders, such as students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Together, all of these can be combined to represent a model of institutional identity that has fluid interaction with individual identity. Research into this notion of a college based self-image is paramount to understanding how individual’s self-identity is developed through interacting with an agency.

## Implications for Policy Makers

Policy makers at the local, state, and national level need to be aware of the impact rural community colleges have on their citizens. In particular, policy makers should consider the following:

- Economic development activities need to be preceded by social programs that increase feelings of self-worth and work ethic. Economic development activities, such as recruiting business and industry to rural areas will be ineffective if they offer a workforce that is poorly motivated and untrained. Taking advantage of rural community colleges to teach concepts such as work ethic, quality of life, and diversity is an important and attractive option that is economically feasible.
- State and federal agency officers and college leaders need to be aware of the unintentional outcomes of their programs, and may need to explore ways to evaluating their effectiveness. The community education programs, summer youth programs, literacy instruction programs, workforce training and re-training programs all have unintentional outcomes. As illustrated in this research, families see what the participant is doing and going through, and these unintentional or secondary outcomes can be just as powerful as the primary intended outcomes. State program officials may especially find it helpful to collaborate with other state agencies to frame programs that have intentional secondary outcomes targeted at different populations.
- Community college governing boards and leaders should develop an understanding and appreciation for the difficult work of maintaining and fostering service area relationships. Often this work takes longer periods of time to develop, but has a real impact on the work of the college and the college’s service to the community. In an environment that is increasingly tied to retention, enrollment growth, and self-sustaining revenue streams, college boards and governing bodies need to be respectful of this time commitment and recognize its value.
- If legislators are interested in developing industry in rural areas, they should invest in rural community colleges to prepare a workforce well in advance of the placement of the business. This means direct funding from state revenues to rural community colleges for community enhancement programs. These types of programs may be especially successful if they are collaborative at both the state and local levels.
- Institutions should examine their self-image and how their image is viewed by various constituents. Using some form of comprehensive assessment, colleges will find it helpful to identify if they are sending the right or wrong or mixed messages to the community, and especially, the community’s youth.
- Collaborative programs with local public schools and four-year universities, funded by state legislatures who have an interest in improving their state’s competitiveness, will prove helpful in creating an expectation for education. This is not to argue that everyone should go to college, but it does imply a greater attendance and completion rate than is currently in place. Further, the cross-institutional approach will allow for a broader set of skill training programs.

Rural community colleges are well positioned to improve the quality of life in the mid-south and around the country. These findings are but the beginning of an important conversation into the power of these institutions to shape their rural environments. State and federal legislators and policy makers need to be made aware of the complexity and comprehensiveness of these colleges, and the result can be a more vibrant and lively rural America.

there are not a lot of jobs that come open here on a regular basis, either. When people get a job here, they stay here.”

The impact on those with strong family histories has been that the college is an important place in their lives and an important tool for providing the economic power for the community to survive and the education for children and grandchildren to receive. One faculty member commented “the college gives so much back to [the community] in terms of money, opportunities, education, and culture. My family has a long relationship with this college, and really, I never imagined that I would work anywhere else. I’m here on the weekend with my kids, or at a football game or basketball game or listening to [the singing group], and it’s just a part of who we are.”

### *Theme 3: Social Good.*

As with many rural areas, school consolidation has had an impact on this community. The local high school was closed and consolidated with a neighboring town, and the result was a shift in thinking about “our high school teams” as a faculty member put it, “to the college’s teams.” He continued by saying “much of the excitement and support that you might typically see for a high school, from middle school aged kids on up to parents and adults, has been transferred to the college. This town loves the excitement it generates!”

This unity development for the community transcends the support and loyalty of athletic teams. A local civic leader commented that “the college brings the community together around the notion of us at [the college] against the rest of the state. “Granted, we don’t compete against State or Ole Miss or Southern Miss, but how we do in competition with the state’s other colleges, and that makes a difference in how we see ourselves.” This includes the ability of the college to impact funding for itself and other community colleges in the state legislature. A staff member commented “we’re territorial here in Mississippi. We don’t wish anyone else harm, but we certainly want to be the best we can be and we want to get as much as we can for this part of the state.”

Another benefit of the college was pronounced first by a civic leader who said “We’ve had a tough history of racism here in Mississippi, especially north of here. So to have the college here and to have it shine as an example of integration is really a good thing. It sets an example and shows young people how to get along in school and in life. We’re a better place because of the college.” This comment was supported by four others who were interviewed, including one town resident, a faculty member, and two college students. The student, in particular, said “there were no Blacks at my high school but there are here, and we get along great. I think [the college] is a great melting pot for a lot of us.” One parent said “the college provides a great example of people from all different races getting along and being friends and working together. That makes a difference in how they behave now and in the future and what, I suspect, they will expect.” This expanding of ideas and perceptions about others is also expanded by virtue of the residential aspect of the college and the migration to campus each day. “There are so many different kids from so many different places, it’s kind of scary – in a good way” said a current student.

## **Conclusions**

Findings from the interview data clearly indicate that rural community colleges do much more than offer traditional academic experiences and job training. Through their actions, programs, and traditions, they appear to influence how students, community members, faculty and staff, and the community citizens see themselves. As these rural colleges had success in offering a variety of programs, the community became engaged with the college and grew as a result of this engagement. Although the level of impact may have varied based on the size of the community, there was clear evidence that the unintentional results of many programs enhanced self worth and image, cultural understanding of society, and the value of education as a tool to a higher quality of life.

This impact was most evident in the Alabama community of 5,000 that had easy access to four-year colleges. In this community, there was little competition for attention, and programs targeted at community youth returned substantially in terms of the college’s image in the community and in community members’ self-image. The impact was diluted somewhat in the community of 12,000, although the effort expended by the college was certainly visible and appreciated by community members. In the community of 1,500, the community college there had almost a direct correlation between self-identity and activities, so that as programs and activities at the college were offered, individuals were engaged and grew in their understanding of themselves and others. The community’s size rather than the college’s size was seen as perhaps the greatest indicator of the potential a college can have on its service area. Subsequently, if there is a real desire for economic growth and the establishment of sustainable business networks in rural America, then the most advisable location to begin such infrastructure development will be the very small communities that host community colleges.

Different perceptions arose from the interview data that suggested that these rural community colleges fulfill a number of different roles that could be categorized as “Town Defining,” “Focus of Community Pride,” and “The Value Added Community.” These broad themes illustrate that rural community colleges have a real impact on those who live near them. To a large extent, all three instances could be classified as Value Added Communities, as citizens, former students, and business leaders all heralded a better life in their towns because of the college. In two instances, the Alabama and Mississippi cases, there was also a tremendous pride that developed

upon previous stages and applying new things learned and experienced to new contexts (Gunter, 2001). And although there are differing conceptions of how identity is framed, for instance a crisis-response development process, all agree that it is a relational concept based on relationships between individuals and another individual or group that impacts virtually every aspect of an individual’s life (Underwood, 2005; see also Lieblich & Josselson, 1994). Although the process is frequently internally singular, it is largely impacted and framed by those around the individual. This reliance on others, then, requires an examination of the role of local communities that have the potential to encourage (or discourage) these social interactions (Brooks, 2000; Evans, 1998).

Communities generally have a sense of their own identity that is something significantly more than a group of individuals. A community has been defined as by shared locality, common values and interests and interrelationships. Further, a community must have certain elements, including role differentiation (age, generation, sex, other common bases – economic allocation, political allocation, cognition, and the non – human environment), solidarity (ideal and actual; not positive-positive correlation, per se), economic allocation, political allocation, and integration and expression (Levy, 1966). Social and commercial agencies can be the means by which a definition of a sense of community can be formed, or it can be formed through community members through their social networks (Dorfman & Lane, 1997). With a specific commercial agency in a town, citizens become prideful of that specific commercial agency. With feelings to share, a sense of community is created and defined, and share their values and interests and this develops strong bonds and high levels of trust. Consequently, community members realize that their well-being is reflective of the well-being of their community. With a specific commercial agency in a town, citizens become prideful of that specific commercial agency. With feelings to share, a sense of community is created and defined. Also, the types of commercial agencies a town has says a lot about what is needed and important to it’s town members. These town members are community members who are part of a community as they need and value similar things.

## **Rural Community Colleges**

Contemporary American community colleges have been both lauded for their success in recent years and warned of drifting away from their original mission. These colleges provide tremendous opportunity for students who have historically not participated in postsecondary education, including minority groups and women. As the first point of entry for many who are not adequately prepared for the four-year college environment, community colleges have historically been considered ‘open-access,’ meaning that the majority of programs offered are related to secondary school, or equivalent, completion. A wide variety of additional programs, particularly those with a strong occupational focus, have been open to those who have not completed secondary schooling. For the later quarter of the 1900s, community colleges flourished in their growth and in serving students with a wide variety of needs, ranging from job training and re-training to remedial education and academic transfer work.

These colleges grew largely through the work of faculty who first began working in two-year colleges with an experience base in secondary schools. Former high school teachers and administrators flocked to community, junior, and technical colleges sometimes as an escape from the challenges of secondary school, including discipline behavior problems. As this initial generation of college faculty and administrators moved into retirement, a new generation of leader, prepared specifically for two-year colleges, began to emerge.

Eaton (1992) and Laabs (1987) warned of the changes associated with these generational shifts, particularly noting the dangers of mission creep and losing sight of the intentionality of access that drove the engine of community college growth. Eaton warned of a growing desire to be more like four-year colleges, to offer bachelor’s degrees and other training, and moving away from the practical job training programs that are often necessary for local communities to survive. Laabs depicted the same concept, highlighting the large number of advanced degrees, including doctoral degrees, which preached and advocated a different set of expectations beyond what community colleges were initially intended to perform. Laabs specifically argued that the increasing number of advanced degrees held, especially doctoral degrees, by community college teachers and administrators, the more they desire to change the community college into something different and more akin to the four-year university.

The shifting of college focus from specific community service has been noticed recently in both the types of services provided by the college and the types of students colleges serve. First, community colleges, particularly in rural areas, have found it difficult to maintain traditional vocational and occupational programs, both due to the changing ‘knowledge’ based economy and the need to maintain student tuition or enrollments. For example, a welding program that has six to eight students is costly to operate, as compared to academic transfer coursework in an area such as English or Math, where a typical classroom can hold 30 to 40 students. Another element in this programmatic change for colleges has been the rise of private vocational providers. The result, however, has been the slow elimination and at the very least restriction of labor-based vocational programs in favor of more cost effective and financially lucrative programs (Katsinas & Miller, 1998).

Second, as community colleges have shifted the types of programs they provide, they have attracted a different base of students (Wolgemuth, Kees, & Safarik, 2003). Students now arriving on campus are more likely to transfer to four-year institutions, are younger

with specific career goals that require a continued education, and students who are expressly looking for an inexpensive provision of education (Jacobs, Miller, Lauren, & Nadler, 2004). Colleges are subsequently attracting more female students who are younger and more academically talented than at any point in their history.

As community colleges are changing in their offerings, they have also changed dramatically in their operation. At one time, the majority of community colleges were funded with local resources, typically a local property tax. This practice has been greatly reduced, as only 18 states currently still use a local taxation mechanism for generating operating revenue for their colleges (King, 1998). This means that there is a greater opportunity to infuse communities with state monies providing the local community college with a role of serving as a community's economic engine. This allows colleges to have a strong role in delivering social welfare programs, remedial education, adult literacy training, and job training. In many instances the local community college is the only formalized tool to bring additional resources, namely state monies, to depressed rural areas (Masoner & Miller, 1995).

Community colleges are facing challenges beyond those related to their scope, mission, and general practices. Often termed a 'crisis,' community college leadership turnover projections are substantial, with some estimates computing that nearly half of all two-year college presidents will retire within the next decade (Katsinas & Kempner, 2001). The results of such turnover might include a reconfiguration of the direction of community colleges, an increased competition with four-year institutions, and staff instability that can result in lost opportunities, decreased efficiency, and financial loss. Additional challenges that community colleges are facing include demands for greater wages by instructional faculty, changing student dynamics that dictate more traditional higher education services, a shift in the concept of job training to continuous job training, and the demands of a knowledge-based service economy and how to best prepare individuals for that changing work environment.

Few hard, critical examinations have explored the challenges facing community colleges broadly, and even fewer have addressed the challenges faced by rural community colleges. In the mid-south region of the US, including Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama, rural poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment rates outpace the entire country. For many small communities, local two-year colleges provide the only opportunity for advancement and source of sustained economy for the towns.

## Community Colleges as Catalysts for Rural Living

Rural community colleges have been viewed by residents, state legislators, and policy makers, as catalysts for sustaining high-quality of life opportunities for rural America. These community colleges indeed provide key educational opportunities for the local population, but they also provide job training, small business support, and in many cases are the focus of town life. Business are more likely to be operated in communities with a college that can provide training, and in these training packages also allow for state investment in workforce development. In essence, state governments can filter money to small communities, thereby increasing tax and revenue production, and subsequently improving the quality of life in a given community.

Rural community colleges have three distinct economic development service activities. These include providing contract training, developing small businesses, and local economic development planning. Contract training differs from traditional vocational or occupational education in that the "client" for the training is a private business, and the training is being done for the express benefits of the business, that is, to improve worker performance or ability. Programs might include learning new computer programs (such as Windows, CAD/CAM), learning to operate new machinery (such as SPS), learning new compliance standards (such as the ISO series). Business also will at times contract developmental education to the extent that it can add to the profitability of the company. Increasingly, state departments of labor, economic development, education, and social services are working to consolidate some of their programs that serve rural communities, and they have found that they can leverage their investment by offering cost sharing with businesses and investing in training through local community colleges. Over 90% of all community colleges offer some contract training.

The second economic development function of community colleges includes small business development. These activities can range from incubators that provide free or reduced office space, to consultative services and advice, such as personnel policy development, hiring assistance, help completing and filing appropriate state and federal paperwork, marketing expertise, data sets that can feed into business plan development, and in some instances, executive on-loan programs to provide seasoned business leadership. Some states have found that they are more effective at offering these types of services by developing networks of community colleges, with expertise on certain areas located at different colleges. This networking approach allows for systems to expand their ability to help rural colleges.

The third area in which community colleges provide economic development support is in local economic planning. These activities might include scanning for economic trends and watching legislation or changes to rules and regulations that impact local business or industry. Several have even moved into the policy making arena, calling meetings of policy makers to debate issues that can impact local industry, actively bringing citizens together to learn about issues that have the potential to impact local business, and providing educational opportunities for local policy makers, such as city council members, about potential economic growth activities

providing services to 54 of the state's 82 counties. In 1964 the legislature created 15 geographic areas that assigned every county to a junior college district. Today, 15 junior college districts operate 21 comprehensive campuses, seven postsecondary vocational-technical centers, and eight multi-purpose vocational-technical centers that serve secondary school students. This rural community college opened in 1928, was accredited in 1939 and serves a local five county area. The college has approximately 150 acres of property and 26 buildings, and includes a football stadium, band practice field, intramural field, a fitness trail and garden, and at least seven residence halls. The college also owns and leases 13 faculty houses near campus.

The college enrolls nearly 3,000 students in credit-based programs, such as academic transfer work, career, and technical education, and 1,800 students in non-credit studies, including tailored job training programs, GED education, and other workforce training programs. The college fields a broad array of student life opportunities, including singing groups and bands, student government, and a comprehensive athletic program, that includes football, basketball, soccer, rodeo, baseball and softball, tennis, and golf. The college also sponsors contests and activities typically found at four-year colleges, including a homecoming court and elections of popularity, and an alma mater.

### *Theme 1: Options.*

The position of the college in a very small town represents not only an economic livelihood for the town, but often defines the attitudes and ideas of those who encounter the college on a daily basis. "I grew up in the football stadium and all I ever wanted to do was go to college and play football," said a recent graduate of the college. "We would climb over the fence on the weekend and play football when they weren't practicing or when there weren't games" he continued. "I guess most of all, I really liked how big the stadium was and how I felt like I wanted to go to college and play football. I guess I would have wanted to play college football regardless, but [the college] really drove it home for me."

The setting of the college near the state capitol provided an illustration of possibilities for the community's youth, and for those who lived in nearby areas and towns. For some, the college provided opportunities to hear singing groups and go to football games, while for others it provided an ability to further an education that could lead to either a career or a four-year university. "I liked growing up here," said a local resident, "it was quiet and safe and when you started to feel ambitious, [the college] was right there. I started coming over here for cheerleading camp, and although I never went to college I really like having it here and I like the students, too."

A copy of the student newspaper reported on a local resident, while changing careers, had just completed his truck driving certification and had won an award for his driving skills. He commented that the college's variety of programs and opportunities presented him the option of where his life could go. Similar stories were told by those working in area industries who credited the college with providing key skill instruction that enabled them to get jobs. And for others who had transferred to the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) or Mississippi State, the comments were directed at quality academic instruction. As one student now at USM commented, "going to school here really gave me the options to either go to work or to a four-year college. I'm just glad I had choices."

For parents living in the community, they, too, saw the institution as providing options for themselves, for their jobs, for their cultural enrichment, and for their children. A father talked at length about his daughter's changing ideas and expectations, and about how she felt comfortable on campus and learned to expect to go to college. He also commented that his sense of expectation of life in this town had grown and was tied to the activities of the college. He said "I've come to expect the college to put on plays, have concerts, and football and basketball games. I guess the college really makes a big difference in how you lead your life in a small town."

### *Theme 2: Tradition Enabling and Family Trees.*

The president of this college commented that there were several 'old' families in town, and that there were literally generations of faculty teaching at the college. "People move here and stay here. I've been here ten years and I'm still 'new'" he said. The role of the college in this rural community was of being the institution that drove the region's economy and was the machinery necessary for a social and cultural environment. Over time, employment at the college became seen as the "good jobs" of the area, as one staff member put it. "Around here there is the county government and the college. If you want a desk job, its one of the two" he said.

Tradition and familial relations can be tied to social structures as well, and with the college receiving state support, in addition to some limited local support and tuition payments, the college is capable of providing the revenue necessary for good paying jobs, and the power structure in place at the college has been respectful of past family glories and traditions. A local shop owner commented "the college does a great job of taking care of the community, and there have been generations of families in this town who have worked there. I suspect that it's a little bit like a company town that takes care of the boss's families."

The college's president indicated that he has been respectful of the family histories and traditions associated with the college and the town, but that he has not made any decisions strictly based on those. "We have a strong system of faculty input into decision-making, and I think there may be some level of support for those with family names in the county." He added, "but, to be honest

important, and yea, I guess I like that its here. I don't always go, but it's something nobody else around here has and it kind of makes us, I don't know, special, in a good way." Another student said "we had a speaker last year who went from homeless to Harvard, or something like that, and it really opened my eyes to some of the things that happen out there in the rest of the world. I don't think that you can get that if you live over [in another town] that doesn't have a college."

"I've gone over to the college for a number of events, really whenever I can," said a local citizen. "We go as a family, my husband, my daughter, and me, and I know that not everyone in town goes, but it's a nice element available here. My daughter, in particular, likes going over there. She's only in middle school, but she's already thinking about how she fits in at college and how she likes to go to events at the college campus. I don't think she sees it as a big deal, but its something that is helping her decide whether or not she wants to go to college."

A business leader agreed with others that the college provides good educational opportunities and that the faculty members are concerned about the welfare of students. "The teachers over there often know the kids parents and brothers and sisters, and they want the students to be successful." "I really think, though, that one of the most important things [the college] does is provide opportunities for people who live here to think bigger and beyond the state of Arkansas, and that's really important. I mean if its not at the college, where do our kids get it? Probably tv, and I'm not sure that's accurate or always a good thing."

### *Theme 3: Opportunity Knocks.*

In the rural Ozark Mountains, access to education and postsecondary opportunities can be difficult. In addition to the logistics of traveling winding roads, many seem to believe that college is not affordable or even a real possibility. In this college's town, however, parents and potential students had a different view of postsecondary education. There were numerous stories of how higher education became accessible because the college was visible and seen as approachable. One parent told an interesting story. "I didn't go to college, my husband didn't go to college, but our daughter's over at [the college]. She's doing pretty well, too. I don't know how she first got it in her head that she was going to [the college] or college at all, but I think living so close to it made a difference." She continued, "plus, her boyfriend played baseball up there, so her last year in high school she went to all his games and stuff, and I guess she just started feeling pretty comfortable up there."

Opportunity was defined as more than enrolling in for-credit programs. As one staff member said, "we've got all kinds of students in all kinds of programs." He referred to occupational training, allied health, truck driving, welding, and other on-site training programs that provide opportunities for local residents to learn valuable skills necessary for employment. When an adult male was asked about his enrollment in a truck driving program he commented "it's a good job, and [the college] really helps get you ready for it." When asked about his family, he responded "I guess they see me as going to college, even if it is to learn to drive....I've got a daughter in high school and she knows how tough it is just to make it today. I hope she goes to college, but its expensive....we've talked about [the college] a lot since I started this program, so maybe she sees it as a little bit more possible."

And in a local church, three women talked about how their children grew up and ultimately decided to go away to college. "I'm so proud of Linley. She's over in Fayetteville at the University of Arkansas. She struggled in high school, but growing up in the shadow of a college really makes you want to go to one." One of the other mothers concurred "Oh I agree. My daughter didn't want to think twice about college while in high school, but her senior year she saw all her friends apply to [the college]. It kind of dawned on her that she expected herself to go to college and that really it was a no-brainer. She ended up at Arkansas State." The third mother commented on her daughter's same result, suggesting that "[the college] really provides an important exposure to college to kids in high school, and that makes living here I guess somewhat better than other places around here."

Finally, the college's president noted that athletics are an important tool for student recruitment and parental involvement. "Sports here are a great way for high school students to keep playing, and we get a good turn out of their friends and parents on campus when we have basketball and baseball games." One student-athlete said "I didn't plan on playing baseball in college and I wasn't even sure I would go to college. But then I got the opportunity to play here, and I'm suddenly graduating next semester."

### **College 3: Mississippi**

The Setting. A small town of just under 1,500, this college town is located in the piney woods near Jackson. A county seat and birthplace of a noted civil rights leader, the town is made up of a small town-square built around the county courthouse, a strip of stores, and one stop-and-go light. The Town Hall offices are located across the street from the one grocery store in town and right next door to the local laundry-mat. The town has four gas stations on the same corner, and a typical visitor gets the feeling that the town is busy by day and quiet by night.

"We're very family oriented here," a gas station attendant said. "It's a great place to raise a family. There are no drugs and drinking; it's peaceful." She continued "I used to live down in [another town], but it was just a hassle. I live out east of here [in the country] and when I go home, I go home. Nobody's in my business."

Junior colleges were first organized in Mississippi in the 1920s, and by 1950 junior college districts were organized and were

(Dougherty & Bakia, 2000 provide an excellent synopsis of these activities).

Colleges can also play a key role in the self-identity of individuals living in or near the town where the college operates. The premise for this book rests heavily on the concept that people who grow up and live near a college, in this case a rural community college, have a fundamentally different outlook or vision of life, pride, and self-identity. This can arise from frequent early contact with the college or its faculty, staff, or administrators, from a community's sense of pride in serving as the home for the college, from the prosperity driven by the college, etc.

### **Findings**

Data collected for this project could be analyzed in a variety of ways, including by interview group, by perceptions and statements, and even by type of respondent. As the intent of the study is broader than individual responses, the most meaningful analysis was determined to be by profiling each rural community college. These findings could then be examined for larger conclusions and implications for policy makers.

### **College 1: Alabama**

The Setting. This rural northern Alabama community is the home of the main campus of this community college system. The college is a two hour drive to the state's largest city, Birmingham, and has approximately 5,000 residents. The institution is near both Mississippi State University and the University of Alabama, and this setting is one of the town's defining characteristics. As one participant commented, "you're either for Bama or State. Auburn? No." The setting provides both educational opportunity in the forms of the local community college and of a short drive to Starkville, Mississippi or Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

The college was formed with the merger of a community college and technical institute, and the result of the wasmerger resulted in a comprehensive community college structure that provides both job training programs and academic transfer work, with the majority of the transfer students enrolling in Mississippi State or the University of Alabama. Just under half of the college's students are of a non-traditional age, and the fastest growing program at the college is in nursing and allied health.

The college was reported to have evolved in its relationship with the community, growing from a posture of distance to acceptance. One college administrator commented "I think [the founding president] just wanted to get the place up and running and focused more on hiring professors and staff then worrying about what [the town] thought of him." She continued "it wasn't until [the current president] came in that people started using the college [facilities] a lot more, and it was him that got people excited about us."

### *Theme 1: Youthful Identity.*

Many students and employees identified with the rural college from an early age. There were some students who had gone to holiday programs "at the college" with their parents when they were little, others went "to the college" to see siblings or relatives participate in sports, and yet others stumbled onto the college's campus at a young age and have grown up with the college beside them. "I had some friends in high school that went to [here], and I just came up here one day to see them and to go to a pool party. I really liked it here, and I mean, I knew a lot of the people at the party, and they all went to school here, and so I just kind of decided to do it too" said one male student. Reports of this nature were common among all of the students who were interviewed. Their introduction to the college was typically informal and related to family and friends having some sort of role or interaction with the college. The same was true for a variety of employees who were familiar with the college or people who already worked there.

What students typically reported through questioning was that they felt good about living in the areas around the college's town, and that the presence of the college reinforced that positive feeling. A caricature of this thinking was reflected by one 19-year old second year student at the college who was raised in the college's town. "I don't think any differently about myself just because I'm from [here] or because we've got a college here. We've got a lot of stuff here that just makes life better than other places around here. I mean we've got the Wal-Mart, there are a couple grocery stores, there's a movie theater. Unless you go to Tuscaloosa, this is where it's at." She then said "When I was in fifth grade I went to camp over at the college – all of us did – and we kept going back. We had some better teachers at school and we would even go to the college's library to do our homework and meet guys. If you grew up anywhere else around here, you wouldn't be able to get to the library or hang out at the college. And that was really a great part of growing up here and something I'll always remember.

Stories of summer programs, such as fifth and sixth grade basketball camp or participating in one of the college's scholarship programs were commonly reported by students. One student commented that he was first on the college's campus when he was one year old and was excited to now be enrolled. Another told of her sister being a cheerleader and how she wanted to follow in her footsteps. Aside from these early exposures to the campus, many of them came back to the idea that they felt special living in or near the town because the college afforded them opportunities that they otherwise would not have had.

"You would have to talk to my Mom or Dad to find out for sure, but I think they live in [here] because there is more going on here than anywhere else around here," commented a 19-year old male student. "My Dad drives about 45 minutes to get to work, but they

live in town because there are restaurants, grocery stores, better houses, and the college.” And did he mean the college or was he simply trying to come up with a list of reasons his parents live in the town? “No, the college really makes a difference here; everybody has some connection to it. Like our next door neighbor teaches there, and I’ve been going to meetings and stuff at the college since I was in junior high school.”

### *Theme 2: Working Pride.*

The second theme identified was that the reputation of the college in preparing students for work was a factor in their enrollment and belief in the college, but more importantly, that it is the quality of the programs that draws students to campus and makes them feel good about their experience there. A faculty member commented “the nursing programs here are really are better than anywhere else around here. I mean even if you went to Birmingham you wouldn’t get a job for sure, but here, you pretty much are guaranteed one.”

“[The college] has a great reputation in getting people ready to transfer” said one 20-year old female. “I think people come here because its got good programs, especially in area jobs. And around here, everybody knows that the college is as good as it gets.” Her friend added “I don’t want to stay here, I want to go someplace bigger like Birmingham or even Huntsville, but I think that [the college] is known in all those places and it will be easier to get a job.”

For students who grew up in the town or within the county, the quality of the college’s programs was not only a determining factor in their decision to enroll, but to a large extent how they saw themselves. “I got into [the college], so I knew I could get into State,” said a 25-year old former student. He continued, “I grew up 20 miles from here and went to a county high school; I didn’t have a clue. So when I went to [the college] I got the self-confidence and skills necessary to be successful in college. And I don’t know how much I learned from books and stuff, but I learned a lot about myself and how to work and [the college] was great for that. [This place] knows how to build your self-esteem and make you feel good about what you can do.”

Similar to the students’ excitement about attending the college, faculty teaching there felt good about their employment and choice of life in this town. “I moved here from New York, in a round about way, but am very satisfied with life here” said one faculty member. “I never, ever thought that I would be living in rural Alabama, but I have to admit that the college creates an excitement here that’s a lot like the way private colleges create community excitement and interaction in the northeast.” An administrator who had moved there from Mobile said “I’ve got a lot of pride in working here, and it shows in the way that I am treated in the community.” And, a local business executive commented generally on the high quality of education students get at the college. He concluded his comments by saying “when our workers complete a program over there, or when kids graduate, they’ve really learned something that they can be proud of, and it shows in the workplace.”

Finally, several students also identified that they felt very good about their quality of life growing up in the town because the college was there and because the college had a positive impact on the kinds and quality of services the town has access to. “Well, you know, I just felt better about being [here] and going to [high school here] mostly because there is more [here], and yea, the college is a big part of who the town is” a former student said. “I don’t think you can say that [the college] alone makes [this] a great town or place to live, but it makes it a lot better and would be just a speck without [the college],” he continued. When asked to elaborate, he said “For starters, there wouldn’t be the same people here – you’d take out all of the college teachers and administrators, and then take out the people who like what the college does and what it stands for. I just really honestly think that you would have a very different place that wouldn’t be nearly as nice to live in or raise a family if it wasn’t for the college.”

### *Theme 3: Center of it All.*

Faculty, students, and administrators all commented on the role of the college in serving as a gathering place for the community. Despite a new community center, the college has the largest capacity for events, and is a frequent gathering place for community organizations and social events. The college’s president suggested that the college really wants to be at the center of the community’s activities. The college’s Provost said “we’re busy every day. I remember one weekend when we had a school graduation, the college graduation and a wedding right here in this ballroom.”

Faculty had a somewhat different approach that resulted in the same conclusion. A liberal arts faculty member said “as faculty, most of us grew up around here and want to give something back to the community. Our job is to take a personal interest in each student, whether they intend to transfer or if it’s for a job-site training program. We all try to get involved and to make a difference.” A staff member also commented that “our jobs really are to help make this a great place to live – and it is or half of us wouldn’t be here!”

Local and nearby business and industry leaders were consistent in their praise for the local college and credited its success as an important decision for their businesses to remain in the area and to be successful. “They really do have a big presence in this town, and it’s a better place because they are here,” said one business leader. Another provided a valuable insight into town perceptions of the college: “we are not here because of the college, but we do better because the college is here and cares for us. I moved here from Georgia and had some serious reservations about it, but this town really has something to offer because of the kinds of

programs and events [the college] hosts.” He continued “and I think it makes a difference in the kinds of experiences the local kids have and how they come to view themselves. For my son, for example, he’s up there pretty much every week and now he expects to go to college. That’s pretty powerful stuff.”

## **College 2: Arkansas**

The Setting. This college town is located in the Ozark Mountains of northern Arkansas and has a population of just over 12,000. With a local military museum, nearby caves that attract tourists, and easy access to the growing sprawl of Branson, Missouri, the college has grown substantially in recent years and now makes use of three campuses, one that is primarily technical education, one that deals mostly with extended education, and one main campus for the majority of academic programs. The college claims in promotional material that “we are your college,” and offers an array of programs ranging from college prep to truck driving and drama to automotive collision repair. The college’s president commented “we are really trying to meet the needs of the community. We don’t have aspirations for bachelors and graduate degrees, we want to take care of the needs of the students and people [of this town].”

A local industry executive commented “we’re a small town in the mountains and you have to come here very intentionally. To stay, you have to accept and enjoy small town and rural living.” A private citizen at the library commented “we don’t want to be bothered, that’s why we live here.” She continued “I know people who live in the hills around here who don’t even get mail – they just want to live and don’t want mailmen or others poking around them all the time.”

Arkansas is a state sharply divided by economic and social wealth. The northwest corner of the state is driven by industries such as trucking and discount retail, while the rest of the state lacks a strong structure and modestly relies on rice production and small farming (including catfish, koi, cotton, etc.). The state’s position on higher education has been to make it accessible in the form of a variety of nearby institutions, resulting in a substantial growth in the number of institutions over the past four decades. The community colleges in the state grew from the 1960s, evolved through a series of mergers, and there are currently 24 two-year colleges and 10-degree granting technical colleges.

### *Theme 1: Center of it All.*

When the current president arrived at the college, he noticed a diffuse image of the institution in the community, and immediately set out to establish the college as at the service of the community. The result of this leadership has been a transformation of the college’s activities and image. “A while back nobody paid any attention to what was going on over at the college, but now it seems that there is something over there every day,” said one person at the local library. A mother commented “I think the college does a lot to engage the people [of this town], and the result is probably that kids who grow up here feel more comfortable thinking and talking about going to college.” A faculty member at the college echoed that thinking “I see high school kids over here all the time. They come to see their friends who are here, maybe playing basketball or watching baseball. They definitely feel at home on the campus and probably see themselves moving on the campus as a student quite easily.”

An elementary school teacher talked about her vision of how her students see the college. “Obviously the kids here [at the elementary school] don’t have a lot of exposure to [the college], but I think they are aware that [our town] has something special. For them, they don’t know a community college from the University, and they do think that we are just as special as the University of Arkansas because of the college being here.”

As in the instance of the college town in Alabama, business and industry leaders see the college as adding greatly to the value of the community, workforce preparation, and improving the quality of life in the community. One leader said “we really enjoy it here, and a big part of our success is tied to what [the college] does. Its not just that they teach people how to do a particular job, but they teach people how to work and be successful. And as for your research project, I think you’re probably right. When a kid’s parents learn new job skills or learn a better work ethic, that gets passed on to the kids and makes a big difference from generation to generation.”

### *Theme 2: Social and Cultural Conscience.*

The college’s main campus consists primarily of a main facility that is linked together with a variety of buildings. Included among these is the college’s very large conference center named after a former politician. The facilities that comprise the conference center are in constant use by community groups and in offering educational programs and classes. These classes range from state and local history to guest lectures and musical performances. “We have really tried to bring cultural opportunities to [the town]” said the college president noting the wide array of speakers and musical performers. “I think all of us see it as our responsibility to provide the community with opportunities that they otherwise would not have” a faculty member commented when looking at the listing of performances and lectures. She continued by saying “I came to a classical music performance here last month and there were a lot of families. We also do a summer concert series and its all families.”

One student, while less enthused by the prospect of listening to classical music commented “yeah, I think programs like that are