

LUMINA FOUNDATION

# FOCUS™

Fall 2019

## A dangerous divide

Rural students face  
a growing gap in  
college-level learning



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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

**W**e've all heard the phrase "flyover country," the dismissive term often used by coastal elites to describe the vast middle parts of the nation that they tend — or *choose* — to ignore. Those two words encapsulate a troubling view — the idea that the nation's less populated areas are somehow less important or less valuable, that the people there can rightly be overlooked.

No idea could be more wrong — or more dangerous to America's future. The fact is our rural areas are teeming with human potential. And if we are to prosper as a nation — economically, culturally, politically, socially — we must unlock that potential. We must, through high-quality education programs, fully develop the talent in our rural regions so that it can be unleashed to benefit us all.

That's what this issue of Focus magazine is about: redefining flyover country as a focal point for a nationwide talent-development effort. In this Focus, you'll read real-life success stories from several rural students. For instance:

- You'll meet Kalyn Jones and Caitlin Davis-Rivers, young women from the vast expanse of far-northern California who overcame huge obstacles to earn their college degrees. Each of the women — now ages 25 and 23, respectively — grew up in a home with a drug-addicted parent and was placed in foster care. But thanks to a program offered by Shasta College, both completed their studies at Shasta and moved on to earn bachelor's degrees at California State University-Chico.
- You'll read about Humberto Perez, a Mexican immigrant who spent his childhood in an impoverished south Texas town once called "Calcutta on the Rio Grande." Today, 23 years after his arrival there as a toddler, Perez is a college graduate. He works as an admissions counselor for South Texas College, helping other Latino students navigate the often-difficult path to an education.
- And you'll hear from Amy Whittaker, 38, a work-release inmate in the Madison Correctional Facility in southern Indiana. Whittaker leaves the prison each weekday to work at a local manufacturing plant. As part of the program, coordinated by Ivy Tech Community College, she's already earned her certification as a production technician, and next year she expects to be certified in industrial maintenance.

All of these individuals — and many more whose stories we share — offer compelling views from the front lines of rural America, putting a human face on an increasingly important national issue.

Along with the material in this printed version of Focus, there's a wealth of additional information on our website, [www.luminafoundation.org](http://www.luminafoundation.org). There, Focus offers several extra features, including compelling videos of the students featured here, plus links to a trove of important research on rural education.

I hope you'll visit the site — and monitor your social media feeds — for everything this issue of Focus offers on the state of education attainment in rural America. More important, I hope you're spurred to action by what you learn. Rural students are a vast and vital national resource — one we can't afford to simply fly over.



Jamie P. Merisotis  
President and CEO  
Lumina Foundation



From 'Corridor' to Clemson

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**On the cover:** Destiny Gomez, 18, perfects her welding technique with help from Jesus Bella Jr., head of the transportation program at the Lyford school district in Texas' Rio Grande Valley. Gomez, who plans to earn her welding certification this fall and then join the Navy, says a hands-on program at her high school helped her find her niche and prepare for a career.



**Editor's note:** The stories in this issue of Focus were reported and written by Susan Headden, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and communications professional with many years of experience covering education issues. Headden, a former staff writer at The Indianapolis Star, worked nearly 16 years at U.S. News & World Report, ultimately serving as a managing editor. She later held senior positions at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. She now works as a communications consultant based in Washington, D.C.

# In rural America, too few roads lead

Here's a surprising fact: Students from America's rural communities graduate from high school at rates higher than the national average. Fully 80 percent of them finish 12th grade, just a shade below the 81 percent who graduate from more prosperous suburban schools. Making up about 14 percent of the school-age population, rural students also score better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress than do students in cities.

And then something goes wrong.

Residents of rural communities attend college at rates remarkably lower than those in both urban and suburban areas. Just 19 percent of rural Americans hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with an average of 33 percent nationwide. Right after high school, 59 percent of rural residents go on to college, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, compared to 62 percent of urban graduates and 67 percent of suburban graduates. When rural students do go to college, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, they are more likely to drop out.

Numerous obstacles have historically kept rural residents from earning degrees and other credentials beyond high school. And many of those obstacles are the same ones facing low-income urban populations: The blue-collar jobs that awaited them didn't require a degree; their parents and other relatives hadn't gone to college; their K-12 schools, chronically short of teachers, left them unprepared; they have problems with money, child care, and health.

But there is one substantial difference between rural high school graduates and their urban and suburban counterparts: Rural students lack access. According to the Urban Institute, about 41 million adults live 25 miles away from the nearest institution of higher learning. And 3 million residents of these "higher education deserts" lack broadband internet.

## Population dwindling

Rural areas continue to suffer steady declines in population, particularly among the young and educated. A third fewer people live in rural areas today than did in the 1950s. High-paying, skilled jobs increasingly tend to cluster at the coasts, where skilled workforces and urban amenities already exist.

Meanwhile, rural areas are eager to attract new businesses as industries such as farming and mining decline and as manufacturers continue to shut down or move overseas.

To expand their economies, rural communities need more skilled and educated workforces. Some rural communities have been successful in attracting new plants and, especially, warehouses. The health care sector continues to grow, as sometimes does the business of alternative energy. But these employers, too, need more skilled workers than these areas now supply.

And it goes the other way. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, rural counties also lag other types of communities, especially urban counties, on key measures of employment of so-called "prime-age" workers — those 25-54 years old. In rural areas, just 71 percent of these workers are employed, compared with 77 percent in urban and suburban counties. Recent census figures show that the number of employed prime-age workers has declined in rural areas, while rising in suburbia and in cities.

Rural America is overwhelmingly white — about 80 percent — but the rural deep South is characterized by a substantial African American population. (The population of South Carolina is nearly 30 percent black; Mississippi, nearly 40 percent.) And throughout the nation, a growing number of immigrants make rural America home. Some 20 percent of rural Americans are now Latino, and the majority of American Indians, who have exceptionally low rates of post-high school attainment, live in rural areas.

Wherever rural Americans call home, transportation is often a significant obstacle to continuing an education. Many isolated miles can stretch between home and school — and public transportation in these areas is virtually nonexistent. Also, in poor communities, a reliable car is hardly a given.

Online education is often cited as a solution to the transportation issue, and it does bring higher learning to many at a fraction of the bricks-and-mortar cost. But here, too, infrastructure comes up short. According to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, 58 percent of rural Americans cite limited access to high-speed internet in their area, and half of those called it a "major problem." (Considerably more nonwhite residents called it a "major problem" than did whites.)

It's a touchy subject — one that invites charges of negative stereotyping — but researchers also say they've found distinct



# to college success

differences in attitudes about higher education in some rural communities. Older residents ask: If they didn't go to college, especially far away to college, then why should their young people? According to the Pew survey, just 71 percent of rural white men think college is worth the investment; among urban white men and suburban white men, the figures are 82 percent and 84 percent, respectively.

## Justifiable skepticism

At least some of this rural skepticism about college-going is perfectly understandable, said Kelly Wilson Porter, an Indiana-based higher education consultant whose recent work has focused on rural students. "After all, 'brain drain' is real," she said. "It's easy to see how some communities view higher education as a threat to their chances of retaining their young people. For them, college often leads to a loss of local talent."

And the students themselves have their own, quite reasonable doubts. "Going to college is not a slight leap of faith for many rural students," Porter said, "because it is especially intangible to them — both as a place and as an ideal stepping stone to a better life."

It's counterproductive — and just wrong, Porter says — to counter this skepticism with charges that rural communities are backward-looking or that rural students devalue or oppose higher education. "The real barrier," she said, "is that higher education doesn't seem to be working *for them*, specifically — as rural people. And because it isn't working for them, we all lose. We're wasting a lot of potential in huge swaths of the country."

Rural higher education has lacked the attention it deserves, advocates like Porter say, precisely because the population is so dispersed. Unlike in urban areas, where solutions can be more easily tested and results seen, the problems of rural America are diffuse. Reform efforts are difficult to scale.

Policymakers and philanthropies — including Lumina Foundation, which has funded Porter's work — are focusing their strategies through a commitment to equity. That has essentially been defined as improving circumstances for African Americans, Latinos, American Indians and low-income people. To these groups, advocates would add rural Americans. They are calling for a separate field of practice, study, and

## Talent Hubs

Twenty-four communities across the nation have earned designation as Talent Hubs — distinguishing themselves for their efforts to make sure their residents receive a quality education beyond high school. The Talent Hubs designation — awarded by Lumina Foundation, in partnership with The Kresge Foundation — shows that these sites meet rigorous standards for creating environments that support student success, particularly among students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students.

More at: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/talent-hubs>

investment. They want "equity of place," while acknowledging that rural residents don't suffer from the same longstanding racism and discrimination as African Americans.

The stories that follow explore four rural regions — the far-north country of California, the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, southeastern Indiana, and a slice of South Carolina — that are pursuing innovative ways to help more of their residents, whether younger or older adults, get college-level learning and earn credentials. Three of the sites have earned designation as Talent Hubs, communities that have shown the capacity to significantly boost education attainment through broad community collaboration (see accompanying box).

The four sites vary widely in geography and culture, and their approaches to the problem differ. But all share a commitment to tackling the problem regionally, and all share a compelling sense of urgency that experts say is vital. The rural-urban educational divide — the persistent gap in attainment between rural students and their urban and suburban peers — must be closed, they say. And soon.

"You can only ignore this problem for so long before there are side effects," Porter said. "And we are there."



# Building a brighter future in 'the other



**REDDING, Calif. —** The far-northern counties of California are blessed with spectacular scenery and a singular vibe. From the coastal redwoods to the inland ranches to the tip of the longest, most fertile valley in America, they take in an extraordinarily diverse terrain.

Shasta Lake threads 11 square miles through fir-covered mountains, and snow-capped Mount Shasta, an active volcano in the Cascades, reigns over all.

# California'



**Kalyn Jones, 25, visits the Shasta College campus to reconnect with Buffy Tanner (left), the college's director of innovation and special projects. Jones, who spent much of her youth in foster care, got a good deal of support from the staff at Shasta — and it meant a lot. After earning an associate degree in the spring of 2017, she went on to earn a bachelor's at Cal State-Chico.**

Cowboys, spiritualists, foresters, off-the-gridders, cultivators of weed — they all make up the motley population that is the North State.

A magnet for hikers and fly fishermen, the region once employed thousands of workers in the copper mining and logging industries. But then came the endangerment of the northern spotted owl, pollution from the copper operations, and the state and federal environmental regulations that sharply curtailed logging and virtually shut down the mines. The changes turned so many residents against the government that the region has often flirted with the idea of seceding from the state. The changes also contributed to lasting social problems.

With the region's 22 percent adult poverty rate, many residents suffer poor health, housing insecurity, and drug addiction — all aggravated by the sheer size and remoteness of the area. California has 58 counties; the seven northernmost cover more than 26,000 square miles, an area larger than West Virginia. In at least one county, cattle outnumber people. Getting from one town to another requires long drives along densely forested mountain roads or on an interstate crowded with Portland-

bound trucks. There are few colleges or universities; the North State is a veritable higher education desert.

When leaders from five counties — Shasta, Trinity, Tehama, Modoc, and Siskiyou — got together a few years ago to tackle the area's problems, they unearthed some startling statistics: Only 30 percent of the region's working-age residents (ages 25-64) held at least an associate degree, and just 20 percent had a bachelor's or higher. Interestingly, 31 percent had attended some college but never finished — a rate that was the highest in California (the state average is 21 percent) and one of the highest in the nation. To the leaders, that meant the area was poised for progress.

"It all came down to education," said Kate Mahar, dean of institutional effectiveness at Shasta College. But to improve attainment, the leaders realized that no single county or organization could take on the challenge. Each of the five counties was doing important work, but by sharing information, data, and resources, they knew they could do a lot more: They could serve the region's far-flung residents from cradle to career.

The result of those initial meetings was a consortium known as North State Together (see accompanying box).



Shasta College has a team of staff members dedicated to student success. Among them (from left): Damaris Stevens, director of dual enrollment; Kate Mahar, dean of institutional effectiveness and director of North State Together; Buffy Tanner, director of innovation and special projects, and Susan Schroth, administrative secretary for the Office of Innovation.



The partnership, funded in part by the local McConnell Foundation, works to boost educational achievement, improve health, and relieve poverty and other social ills.

Central to the partnership's mission is re-engaging students who've stopped out of college and smoothing their paths to marketable degrees. Shasta College, a community college in Redding, acts as the backbone organization for North State Together. Shasta is the only public college serving Shasta, Trinity and Tehama counties — an area larger than each of nine states. And it serves stopped-out students with two new programs in particular: one that helps them earn associate degrees faster, and another that offers students continued local support while they complete bachelor's degrees elsewhere.

The first program, Accelerated College Education, or ACE, takes advantage of the fact that older working students are motivated, disciplined, and in a hurry. The typical student in this category has a full-time job, a family, and might take one class each semester. At that rate, it would take 20 terms to earn an associate degree (10 to earn a certificate).

## North State Together

The consortium includes area businesses, civic leaders, workforce-development organizations and institutions of higher education such as the University of California-Davis, the College of the Siskiyous, Shasta College, and California State University-Chico. It works collaboratively to enhance educational options and boost economic development by re-engaging adults who have left the formal education system. Through programs such as ACE, BOLD, STEP-UP, and the Siskiyou County Adult Ed Diploma, North State Together supports adults who seek credentials or career opportunities.

*More at: <http://northstatetogether.org/>*



As director of North State Together, Kate Mahar coordinates a regional partnership that aims to improve the quality of life in a vast, five-county region in far-northern California. The most important step in the group's improvement plan? According to Mahar: "It all came down to education."





**Jeff Hoxie, 39 — here at his “day job,” checking the specs on precast concrete forms — is a later-in-life college student. He earned an associate degree in business this May through Shasta College’s Accelerated College Education (ACE) program, which is designed for working adults. Hoxie’s next step: choosing the institution at which he’ll pursue a bachelor’s in construction management.**

“That’s almost seven years!” said director Buffy Tanner. “And that’s assuming the class schedules work with the rest of your life.”

For this group, they rarely do. So the ACE schedule compresses courses into eight weeks instead of the usual 17. Working at this accelerated pace, students can complete a certificate in just nine months and an associate degree in two years — even less if they earned some credits before entering the program. And to accommodate students’ jobs and families, classes always meet on the same two days — Tuesdays and Thursdays — in the morning or

evening. Some courses can also be taken online.

The adult students enjoy personalized support from Shasta staff, and the model encourages them to engage with older students in similar circumstances. Being in a cohort gives them a sense of community and belonging that often eludes older students.

“They really do support each other,” Tanner said. “If one of them leaves or is absent, they keep tabs on them.” Tanner tells of a student who couldn’t make it to her graduation last year; her classmates made a cardboard cutout of her and included it in the class photo.

Hoxie, here sharing a book with his 5-year-old daughter, Danika, started at Shasta College right out of high school but dropped out soon after. "Next thing I knew, 17 years had gone by," he recalls. Today, he has a powerful motive to succeed — sitting right next to him. "Ninety-five percent of my reason for going back to college was to show my daughter," Hoxie says.





Among this year's graduates is Redding resident Jeff Hoxie, 39, who juggled college classes with 10- and 12-hour days as an inspector for a precast concrete company. Hoxie had first enrolled at Shasta years ago, right after high school, his main interest being football. Then he got a job at Costco. "For the first time I was making money," he says. "And the next thing I knew, 17 years had gone by."

Today Hoxie has a 5-year-old daughter, Danika, who is growing up in a world in which a high school diploma will no longer suffice. "Ninety-five percent of my reason for going back to college was to show my daughter," he said. A business major, Hoxie went to class Tuesday and Thursday nights — and took some courses online — under the ACE model. He makes clear that "accelerated" doesn't mean "watered-down." "Acceleration is a whole other beast," he said. "You have a test every couple of days. It's good if you're disciplined, but if you're a slacker, it's not."

## 'I hated school'

Hoxie's classmate Rachelle Stahle, 26, a married mother of three, shares his assessment. Stahle was already more than busy taking care of her family and working as a custodian at the college. After high school, she says she had "absolutely no interest whatsoever" in attending college. "I hated school," she said. "I had some rough teen years."

Her plans to join the military were foiled by a knee injury, and marriage and family decided the rest. Like Hoxie, she said, "my kids were my push." She, too, took the speedy route. "Acceleration is good and bad. When I took a 17-week course, it was painfully slow. But with compressed, there is no easing into it."

Some faculty members argue against the shorter course sequences, saying students need more time to process information so they can better retain it. But academic studies have shown that shorter terms can be just as effective as traditional ones. Tanner pointed to one academic study showing that students in developmental education perform better with shorter courses. She also cited a study that compared nursing students in shorter and longer courses and found no difference in their performance on the licensing exam.

So far, the results at Shasta seem to bear out the findings of such studies. Of the 62 students who enrolled through the ACE program in August 2018, 49 (79 percent) are still in the program. Factoring in those students who are taking planned leaves, that figure rises to 87 percent. Also, the passing rates for the ACE students are better than those for students overall — 89 percent versus 79 percent.

Support at Shasta doesn't end with an associate degree. Most older students find it impossible to pull up stakes and move to the campus of a four-year university. On the other hand, pursuing an online degree can be isolating. So Shasta makes it easier for its alumni to get their bachelor's degrees online from another institution, but with on-site Shasta support. Students in the Bachelor's



Rachelle Stahle — here with son Wyatt, 3, and daughter Scarlett, 4 — is also a student in Shasta's ACE program. She attends to her studies while off the clock as a custodian on the college's campus in Redding. Stahle is seeking an associate degree in psychology and plans to pursue a bachelor's degree.



through Online and Local Degrees (BOLD) program take one-unit classes at Shasta, paid for by the Shasta College Foundation, that help them adjust to their new university and careers. And as they pursue their bachelor's classes online, they connect with each other while enjoying access to Shasta's library, computer labs, high-speed internet and health center.

"Shasta College is their academic 'home,' and the BOLD cohort is their academic 'family,' Tanner explained.

Among that family are former foster youth, a population with an exceptionally low rate of college completion — under 4 percent nationally. It's also a population that is over-represented in this rural region of the state. In Shasta County, the rate of child abuse and neglect is nearly 9 percent, compared with 5.5 percent for the state as a whole.

Recognizing the transition issues these students can face, Shasta College shows former foster children some extra love: weekly workshops, academic help, field trips, personal mentoring and, perhaps most important, a community. Along with the occasional gas card and grocery voucher, these supports help students succeed in their course work while helping them develop skills they

need to transition to four-year colleges and careers. BOLD also allows students to stay connected to these services once enrolled in four-year schools.

Shasta alumna Kalyn Jones, 25, has navigated an unusually rocky path from childhood to her recent graduation from California State University-Chico. Her mother, an ex-felon, died of a drug overdose when Kalyn was small. Her father, a disabled Army veteran with drug problems and a criminal record of his own, ran a small-time marijuana operation in remote Crescent City, neglecting Kalyn to the point of sending her to foster care.

She ran away a few times, dabbled at College of the Redwoods, and finally realized: "If I don't get out of Crescent City, I'm going to end up a cashier at Walmart for the rest of my life." She eventually made her way to Shasta, crediting Foster Youth Counselor Robert DePaul with saving her educational life. "I probably would not have graduated if it had not been for Bob," she said.

Collecting her Cal State-Chico degree with Jones was former foster child and fellow Shasta alum Caitlin Davis-Rivers, 23, whose childhood was disrupted repeatedly by housing evictions and school changes. In her case, too, the cause was adult addiction. "I was the



**Kalyn Jones and Buffy Tanner revel in Jones' college success. It's a record of achievement that Jones hopes to continue in law school — and all the more impressive considering her time in foster care. "College is about having to be independent and leave the nest, but foster kids didn't even have a nest to fly out of," Jones points out. "We weren't equipped with the tools we needed when we got out of that foster home."**





**Stephen Schoonmaker is president of the College of the Siskiyous in Weed, California — one of four institutions in the North State Together consortium. Here he talks with Dawnie Slabaugh (left), the college's public relations director, and Mikayla Hocker, who graduated this spring and will soon attend Southern Oregon University.**

parent," Davis-Rivers recalled, and that meant she wasn't much of a student. She skipped school regularly and racked up a string of failing grades.

"I didn't know what studying was," she said. "Middle school was the worst time of my life." Davis-Rivers fared little better in high school and was placed with foster parents with whom she regularly clashed. No one talked to her about college, she said, but there was one thing she knew: "I didn't want to end up like my parents."

With her bachelor's degree in psychology, Davis-Rivers hopes to work as a counselor; Jones plans to attend law school. Both are passionate advocates for foster youth, and both say assistance like Shasta's is needed to level the educational playing field for this neglected group of young people.

"I understand that college is about having to be independent and leave the nest," Jones said, "but foster kids didn't even have a nest to fly out of. We weren't equipped with the tools we needed when we got out of that foster home." The two young women understand that former fosters may welcome college as a chance to lose that label. But as Davis-Rivers said: "Once you realize it's not your fault, it's a safe space. I loved coming here. You feel an instant connection with these people. Even people you wouldn't hang out with, even people you couldn't stand — we have this bond."

## Starting early to succeed

As effective as these on-campus supports are, they are coming late in the game. To boost attainment, educators and activists know they have to change minds starting in the early grades. For instance, California has seven academic requirements for admission to state colleges, and too many students in the region were blowing them off.

"Many students were taking the attitude that 'There isn't a university here, so we don't need these,'" said Becky Love, a longtime high school counselor now with the Shasta County Office of Education. Another problem in this fiercely independent region is the sheer number of school districts, all with different standards for student advising. "Some were pushing rigor, others social and emotional learning," Love said. They have now agreed to make counseling more robust and consistent; they are talking to more students, earlier — starting when they are freshmen — and tracking them carefully. "[The districts] were being reactive," Love said, "and now they are being proactive."

Meanwhile, at the far end of the pipeline, North State Together is working to make sure that the post-high school experience, whether it leads to a certificate or a bachelor's degree, connects to industry demands. New California legislation requires this alignment, along with other community college reforms, but the colleges here are ahead of the game. They're creating academic pathways and building bridges to each other and to the sectors that are poised for local growth: manufacturing,

small business creation, culinary arts, hospitality, health care, energy, and global business.

Preparing students for jobs in the technology sector has proven more challenging. "Internet access is a problem here," said Eva Jimenez, Shasta's associate vice president of economic and workforce development. "A lot of people are still on dial-up. When it snows, the whole town can shut down."

Another feature of the rural North State is unspoken but inescapable: It is the epicenter of the U.S. pot-growing industry. For years operating in the shadows, the industry is emerging with the full legalization of marijuana in California and several other states.

## Careers in cannabis

Spreading rapidly, legalization means legitimate careers here in the "Emerald Triangle" in cannabis research, cultivation, and marketing. It's also giving area colleges a chance to help students prepare for these careers in a responsible way. According to Arcview Market Research, which tracks the industry, the business will support 467,000 jobs in the United States by 2022.

That's a prospect local colleges can't afford to ignore. About 70 miles from Shasta College, near the Oregon border, is College of the Siskiyous. It's a two-year institution whose stunningly beautiful campus sits at the base of Mount Shasta in a town called Weed. (No, it wasn't named for the plant, but for pioneer Abner Weed, who founded a lumber mill there in the late 1890s.)

College of the Siskiyous is the sole institution of higher learning in a sparsely populated county — seven people per square mile — that's as big as Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. One of the few community colleges that boards students, it's known for programs in, among other disciplines, justice administration, theater, business, and fire service.

To these courses of study, why not add programs that play to the local economy and draw on existing pot-growing expertise? Newly installed President Stephen Schoonmaker isn't making any endorsements, but he noted that the California agricultural industry already offers good jobs in quality control: maintaining government standards for vegetables, fruits, and other farm products. Just as vintners conducted studies on soil and climate for Napa Valley grapes, the cannabis industry will be conducting similar research.

"Without being partisan, how do we support the growing demands of this industry?" Schoonmaker asked. "And not just cannabis, but the medicinal qualities of certain herbs?" Research has not been a traditional area of focus for community colleges, Schoonmaker admitted, but in this case, he asked: "Why not do research here?"

College of the Siskiyous also illustrates the challenges of rural life for colleges themselves. Although it is the only institution of higher learning for miles around — or perhaps because of it — Siskiyous has struggled with financial problems and gone through five presidents in



**Raychel Norton, a 36-year-old mother of three, came up the hard way in rural northern California. A recovering meth addict who did prison time for multiple felonies, she's benefiting from STEP-UP, a program Shasta College offers to help formerly incarcerated people earn degrees. Norton, who is pursuing a business degree, confers here with Lars Norine (left) and Jonathan Farley, mentors in the college's Extended Opportunity Programs and Services office.**



the past eight years. It recently lost a service agreement with the San Francisco Fire Academy, which had provided the college with hundreds of students. And in an area of declining population — on top of a shrinking number of college-age students to begin with — Siskiyou and Shasta have had to be innovative in recruiting students and meeting industry needs.

Schoonmaker's counterpart at Shasta, President Joe Wyse, welcomes the freedom he's been given to try new initiatives, make mistakes, and expand programs that work. Among the more controversial is a partnership with the Shasta County Sheriff's Office and other organizations that provides academic, logistical, and limited financial support for addicts and criminal offenders. The students in the program, known as STEP-UP, range from those

with years-old DUI convictions to felons with more recent and serious criminal histories.

Raychel Norton, 36, a married mother of three, is among the latter. Having barely finished eighth grade, and addicted to methamphetamines by age 16, Norton did time for burglary, grand theft, forgery, and identity theft. "I was smart, but sneaky," she said. She cycled in and out of rehabilitation facilities over the years.

With a high school equivalency degree earned in the Sonoma County Jail, she is now thriving at Shasta, taking courses in history, political science, and astronomy. In the fall, Norton will take accounting, English and business law, and in 2020 she is due to graduate with a major in business. Named "STEP-UP Student of the Year," she already has been accepted at Cal Sate-Chico.



**Janet Hubbert, who graduated from Shasta's ACE program in May with an associate degree in business, is now taking online classes through Southern Oregon University in pursuit of her bachelor's. Here she confers with Jonathan Farley, also a Shasta graduate who's attending a four-year school. Eventually, Farley hopes to return to Shasta to teach mathematics.**



"STEP-UP has transformed lives," said Eva Jimenez of Shasta. To date, the program has served 176 students, and 38 graduated in May with associate degrees and various certifications. Eighty-three percent of the graduates are employed. The state of California recently gave Shasta a \$1.5 million grant to replicate the program statewide.

Unique even to California, the five counties of the North State Together collaborative are home to more than 9,400 American Indians, representing 21 federally recognized tribes and 10 others with deep local traditions and influence. That amounts to 3.1 percent of the population (4 percent in Siskiyou County), compared to .08 percent for California overall. While American Indians are still the smallest ethnic group in this overwhelmingly white region, their impact, says Mahar, is

"historically and culturally profound."

They also suffer disproportionately from social problems that interfere with learning. Their high school dropout rates exceed those of the general population here and throughout the state. American Indians are also the least-represented ethnic group in the California state university system, and they have an overall bachelor's attainment rate of less than 20 percent. On the color-coded state education report card, which grades student performance from green to red — red sounding an alarm — "this group is orange and below in every category," counselor Becky Love pointed out.

Many of the educational woes in the Native community can be traced to chronic absenteeism, starting in the early grades. Tribal students routinely struggle with transportation, often living hours away from public schools. They are often called on to care for elders or younger siblings. A dental appointment can become an all-day family affair. And tribal ceremonies, such as those associated with the annual salmon run, can require a trip to another state and last for days. Overlaying all these issues is the legacy of forced assimilation, which has led many Native people to distrust public schools.

Among the possible responses: embedding more Native American history in the K-12 and college curricula and introducing place-based accelerated programs, designed with tribal communities, that meet the needs of each nation. Thanks in particular to the work of tribal leaders and the Shasta County Office of Education, progress is being made, but it has been slower than expected.

"There was so much healing to be done first," Mahar said. One of the tribes recently sued an area school district for discrimination, arguing that native students were being disproportionately disciplined. And a small battle erupted recently when high school graduates were forbidden to wear eagle feathers on their mortarboards. "It's a myth that these families don't care about education," Mahar said. "It's just that our systems haven't been welcoming to them."

In part because of setbacks like these, the partners of North State Together have tried to be realistic about their ambitions. Still, by working to better understand and accommodate native populations, stopped-out adults, and all students, they are intent on reaching a goal of 50 percent regional postsecondary attainment by 2020.

As to the Shasta College class of 2019: They made it to the finish line despite a year that was bookended by disaster. It started with the massive Carr wildfire, a blaze that ranked among the worst in American history, killing seven people, leveling 200,000 acres, and destroying more than 1,000 homes. And it ended with a freak hailstorm and tornado warning that forced the cancellation of graduation ceremonies that Shasta's adult students had waited years to attend.

Through it all, a true North State community was forged, one that saw residents helping each other, working together, achieving together — and being strengthened by the experience. ■



# Down on the border, student success is



**McALLEN, Texas** — Hard on the Mexican border, stretching from Roma to Brownsville at Texas's southernmost tip, the Rio Grande Valley takes in mile after mile of dusty ranches, citrus groves, and sugar cane fields. Still an important center of agriculture — most of the nation's grapefruit is grown here — it also has been changing steadily since the arrival of the *maquiladoras*, the border factories built to take advantage of tariff-free zones.

# no borderline issue



Dania Duarte tackles her schoolwork on the kitchen counter as her younger sister and mother chat in the family home in Brownsville, Texas. Duarte, 20, who attends Texas Southmost College, plans to transfer to the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, earn a bachelor's degree, and become a teacher.

The economy now increasingly depends on other industries: health care, education, retail, shipping, aerospace, construction of a liquified natural gas pipeline, trucking, and lately, border control. The population of the valley has exploded from 325,000 in 1969 to 1.3 million today.

All this makes the Rio Grande Valley the fastest-growing area of an economically booming state, subject to all of the pains that come with it. It's not just the threats to farms and wildlife — or the fact that the interstate, crowded with trucks and cluttered with billboards, backs up like Los Angeles during rush hour. The region's biggest challenge is to prepare its residents for skilled jobs that are cropping up faster than they can be filled.

That education challenge is a heavy lift for any fast-developing region, but it's particularly acute in a place where the distances are so vast, the heritage so rural, and the people so poor. Fully 86 percent of valley residents are considered economically disadvantaged. Add to these barriers the fact that the region is 90 percent Hispanic, and that until recently education resources have been limited. "We have had a brain drain because of access to higher education," said Javier Salinas, an assistant director of undergraduate admissions at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in Brownsville.

Despite these hurdles, this distant corner of the Lone Star State is by some measures a model of educational progress among low-income, Latino groups. The Rio Grande Valley accounts for half of student enrollment in the state's high-performing, high-poverty districts. Eighty-eight percent of the students attend a district rated A or B by the state, and 92 percent graduate from high school. Students here are outperforming their statewide peers in third-grade reading and eighth-grade math. And more valley students — 60 percent — enrolled in postsecondary programs within a year of



## RGV FOCUS

The RGV FOCUS network, a collaboration with Educate Texas at Communities Foundation of Texas, involves local partners in several cities and three institutions of higher learning: South Texas College, Texas Southmost College, and the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. The network works to strengthen and amplify strategies that have proven effective in re-engaging students who have stopped out, encouraging them to return and helping them earn credentials beyond the high school diploma.

*More at: <https://www.edtx.org/rgv-focus/home>*



**Tania Chavez (left), head of La Unión del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), confers with Katherine Diaz, deputy director of RGV FOCUS. LUPE, a nonprofit that serves and supports Latinos in the Rio Grande Valley, is part of the RGV FOCUS partnership.**

high school graduation than did Texas students overall.

“There is definitely a can-do attitude here, an attitude of ‘why not us?’” said Katherine Diaz, deputy director of RGV FOCUS, a partnership that works to improve college readiness, access and success (see accompanying box).

And yet, a discouragingly small group of students in the valley — just 7 percent — score high enough on the ACT or SAT to be considered ready for college. And when they do go to college, their completion rates are even lower than the state’s poor rates overall. Only 19 percent of valley residents between ages 25 and 64 hold at least an associate degree, compared with 38 percent for Texas and 42 percent nationally. Most notably, a third of the region’s working-age residents never finished high school. In Texas overall, that figure is 15 percent; nationally, it’s just 11 percent.

The partners and allies of RGV FOCUS are working to radically improve those numbers, attending to every section of the educational pipeline in a collaborative way. With 146,216 adults between the ages of 18 and 24 — and over one-third of them struggling to some extent with English — the partners are concentrating on getting more of the valley’s young people into and through college-level programs. The approach is comprehensive, and it starts with efforts to help students finish high school and be better prepared for college. The group also works to make college more accessible and more focused on ensuring student success. Local colleges are better aligning their curricula with workforce needs and

offering deeper support for students. That support includes basics such as transportation, food, and English language lessons, and it also features intensive advising about academic pathways, schedules, and financial aid.

## Young and striving

Compared with those of most rural areas, the valley’s population is exceptionally young; the median age is 30. And unlike many rural areas, the young people stay: 75 percent of recent high school graduates who go on to college enroll at one of the institutions in the valley. Recent efforts are catering to the traditional college-age population in two specific ways: 1.) by re-engaging graduates who earned college credit through dual-enrollment programs while in high school, and 2.) by targeting students who could benefit from so-called “reverse transfer” — that is, awarding them associate degrees while they pursue their bachelor’s.

The four-county effort brings together K-12 schools, community groups, and three colleges: the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), a four-year university that evolved from other institutions and was established in 2015; and Texas Southmost College and South Texas College, both community colleges. UTRGV also recently opened the first medical school in the region. “Now instead of having to go to Austin, Houston, or Dallas, students can stay here,” Salinas said.



**“Honestly I didn’t think I could go to college,” says Texas Southmost student Dania Duarte (center), flanked by her mother, Adriana Ledezma, and sister, Andrea. “We never had any money. Nobody ever said ‘Hey, you need to do this.’ It was more me doing it for myself.”**



**Ariel Hernandez is a 20-year-old criminal justice major at Texas Southmost College who plans a career as a game warden. She laments the fact that too few of her peers even consider pursuing education beyond high school. “They don’t get the encouragement they need,” she says.**

“The theme is: ‘We grow our own,’” added Michael Aldape, director of special programs at UTRGV.

For students at Texas Southmost, staying here can mean simply moving their studies across the road, to UTRGV, where they now enjoy automatic transfer providing they have at least a 2.0 GPA. That’s the plan for second-year Texas Southmost students Dania Duarte, 20, and Ariel Hernandez, 20, who are both student mentors for the college. In the part-time job, they visit local high schools to show students the college ropes, helping them with registration, financial aid and the like. The value of higher education is a proposition many of these students don’t immediately grasp, according to Duarte and Hernandez.

“They just want to get a job right after high school and make money,” Hernandez said. “They don’t have the encouragement they need.” She and her Texas Southmost classmate understand — because they’ve been there.

“Honestly I didn’t think I could go to college,” said Duarte. “We never had any money. Nobody ever said ‘Hey, you need to do this.’ It was more me doing it for myself.” After college, Hernandez, a criminal justice major, aims to be a game warden. Duarte, who will major in English at UTRGV, has set her sights on teaching.

About 300,000 residents of the Rio Grande Valley live in the grim settlements known as *colonias*, unincorporated communities developed by unscrupulous landowners in the 1960s when Mexican workers were first brought over to fill agricultural jobs. Today these immigrants, some documented and some not, continue to live in truck-sized, patched-up motor homes or flimsy shacks sitting on grassless lots along unpaved roads. The *colonias* often lack streetlights and proper sewer systems. Internet

access is slow, spotty, and sometimes nonexistent. These deprivations, and others, combine to make everyday life quite difficult — and the path to a good education almost impossibly steep.

When the rain comes, as it does often in these flood-prone lands, the dirt roads of the *colonias* turn to mud and worse: If students can get to school at all, they may be walking to the bus with plastic bags on their feet, or even floating to the bus stop. “Even if you have transportation, you may be canoeing out of your home,” said Tania Chavez of La Union del Pueblo Entero, a nonprofit that serves this population.

The lack of internet access is educationally crippling — even for students lucky enough to have laptops. To snag free Wi-Fi connections, students regularly sit in school parking lots or squat at tables in fast-food joints whose managers are kind enough not to insist on a purchase.

Higher education has not always opened its arms to undocumented students. Although many of these students have lived in the United States for most of their lives, they often have fewer rights than students coming here on visas. They are not legally able to work or obtain federal financial aid, though, in Texas, they are eligible for state aid and, at many colleges, private aid. Until recently these restrictions have discouraged about half of all undocumented students from going to college.

That doesn’t mean they don’t want to — or that their parents discourage them. “It’s a myth that Latino families don’t value higher education,” Diaz said. “I have absolutely never heard that in the valley.” But many immigrant families have a different perspective — one usually not informed by family college experience — and family ties *are* especially tight. So as the colleges have improved



**Humberto Perez (center) talks with Luis Torres (left) and Alberto Salazar, both incoming freshmen on the Pecan campus of South Texas College in McAllen. Perez, 25, was born in Mexico and came with his family to the Rio Grande Valley when he was just 2. He's now a graduate of both South Texas College and Texas A&M University.**



and formalized their efforts to support student success, they also are improving communication with parents. "Going to college is a family affair," said Debbie Gilchrist, who directs the student service centers at UTRGV. "We help the parents understand degree plans and financial aid. These are parents who haven't seen colleges. We want to be a community resource, not an ivory tower."

These efforts reach down to K-12 as well. Even at the middle school level, parents need to understand how the state's graduation requirements are changing to better align with colleges and careers. They need to see why it's important for their children to take advanced math and four years of English no matter where they're headed later. "We want all students to be prepared for college. Taking Algebra II and English IV helps them do that," Diaz said. "We want their education to be more rigorous no matter what."

A big boost to students in the valley has been the option of dual enrollment, an increasingly popular arrangement in which students earn college credit as juniors or seniors in high school. More than 20 percent of the state's dual-credit courses are completed in the Rio Grande Valley. At some valley high schools, one of every four students earns an associate degree before graduation. In the fall of 2018, higher education institutions in the valley enrolled more than 15,000 high school students in dual-credit courses.

Students choose dual enrollment because it works. In a recent study of dual enrollment in the University of Texas System, researchers found that students' exposure to just one dual-credit course — such as English, college algebra, or political science — significantly improves their chances for success in college. The courses are free, and unlike Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses, students are required only to pass the course, not score well on a test, to earn the credit. Moreover, many schools in poor areas don't even offer AP or IB courses.

## Straight outta 'Calcutta'

Humberto Perez, 25, grew up in Las Milpas, a *colonia* (now part of the town of Pharr) that the Associated Press once called "Calcutta on the Rio Grande." Perez, who came over from Mexico when he was 2 years old, said the label fit. "It was definitely the other side of the tracks," he recalled. "There was a lot of drugs, gang activity, crime." Undocumented, Perez worked to help support the family as soon as he was able. He got a job at a taqueria, being paid off the books because he didn't have a work permit. He also served as the family translator, reading the monthly bills to let his parents know how long they could go without paying them. "I never believed I could go to college," he said. "There was no money for that."

But when Perez was in high school, he took classes at South Texas College through the dual-enrollment program. "I saw it as an opportunity to at least get an education even if I couldn't go to college," he said. He

graduated from high school with good grades and an associate degree. "My main goal was to get my family out of their situation," he said. But he also knew he wanted the kind of job that would require a bachelor's degree. "Otherwise I'd be working at an import-export facility where you peel the cactuses or arrange the oranges for shipping."

By then protected by the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, Perez was awarded a generous merit scholarship to Texas A&M University. He also continued to help support his family back home. "I felt a lot of guilt that I was there and they were still

here," he said. After graduation, he returned to the valley, and is now working as an admissions counselor at South Texas College in McAllen.

Perez's personal experience, and his work with undocumented students, give him an informed perspective on the current political climate regarding higher education and immigration. "Students are scared," he said. "They are scared because they don't know who to trust. They need assistance, but they're afraid to ask. They need to work, but they have to work under the table. Many of these students feel there is no point in going to college if they can't work afterward."



**Perez, here working with Torres in a computer lab, is a counselor at South Texas College. He's committed to creating opportunity for those who, like him, have come to America in search of a better life. "They can go up north and work on the oil rigs," Perez says, "but we want them to have something better to fall back on."**



Perez cited a student who wanted to study at South Texas College to become an emergency medical technician. But he was worried he couldn't get certified. "They can go up north and work on the oil rigs, and make \$15 to \$20 an hour, but we want them to have something better to fall back on."

The Texas College and Careers Readiness School Models Network is building pathways to those better opportunities. It's a network of Texas STEM academies, early-college high schools, technology-oriented high schools and industry-cluster academies that prepare students for careers in fields such as aerospace, petroleum refining,

manufacturing and energy. Led by the Texas Education Agency and Educate Texas, these initiatives help historically underserved students, like those here in the valley, earn dual credits while pursuing paths to in-demand jobs.

Among the participating high schools is Lyford, which serves 475 students in a dusty farming town many miles from city services. Although half of its virtually all-Latino student population is deemed at risk of dropping out, and although 80 percent are considered economically disadvantaged, the school's on-time graduation rate exceeds 95 percent. Still, students' average SAT and ACT scores, along with their Advanced Placement passage



rate, are well below the state average. Lyford is working to improve students' college readiness, at the same time making its curriculum more relevant to STEM-related and other careers. The school has done that by introducing practicums — in technology, law, and agricultural science, among others — in which seniors spend a chunk of their day working hands-on with local firms and the school district itself.

## Woman with a wrench

One of the students who followed the practicum route is Destiny Gomez, 18, who on this day has her head under the hood of a school bus. The daughter of a single mother, Gomez spent part of her childhood helping her grandfather, who also worked in the school transportation department. "He was always working with tractors and cars, and he usually had me there doing tasks and he'd show me how to do it on my own," Gomez said. "He said the field was so male-dominated and that people would try to scam us because we were girls and they assumed we didn't know what we were doing."

At Lyford, Gomez took classes in the morning, then headed off to the transportation garage in the afternoon, where she and three other students learned how to repair small engines, working their way up to diesels and other mechanical parts. She also developed a passion for welding. Barely 5 feet tall, Gomez admits she had trouble reaching the equipment. But she says she wanted to be a role model for women. "The men always told us we were too small to carry our weight," she said, "but I wanted to prove them wrong."

In September, Gomez will enroll at Universal Technical Institute in Irving, a for-profit training school with a high rating from the federal government. She hopes to become certified in welding, and then enlist in the Navy, after which she believes she'll be set for a secure career. "I would not have laid out my future if it weren't for this (program)," Gomez said. "I would never have realized what I loved to do."

When it comes to educational achievement, the Rio Grande Valley has a long way to go. But its trajectory is trending upward. If progress continues on its current path, 74 percent of eighth-graders will be reading at grade level by 2025 — more than double the number today. The percentage of high school graduates scoring "above criterion" on the SAT and ACT, just 5.4 percent in 2012, will nearly double by 2025. And by 2025 the region will see a doubling in the percentage of students taking dual-enrollment or AP courses to 64 percent.

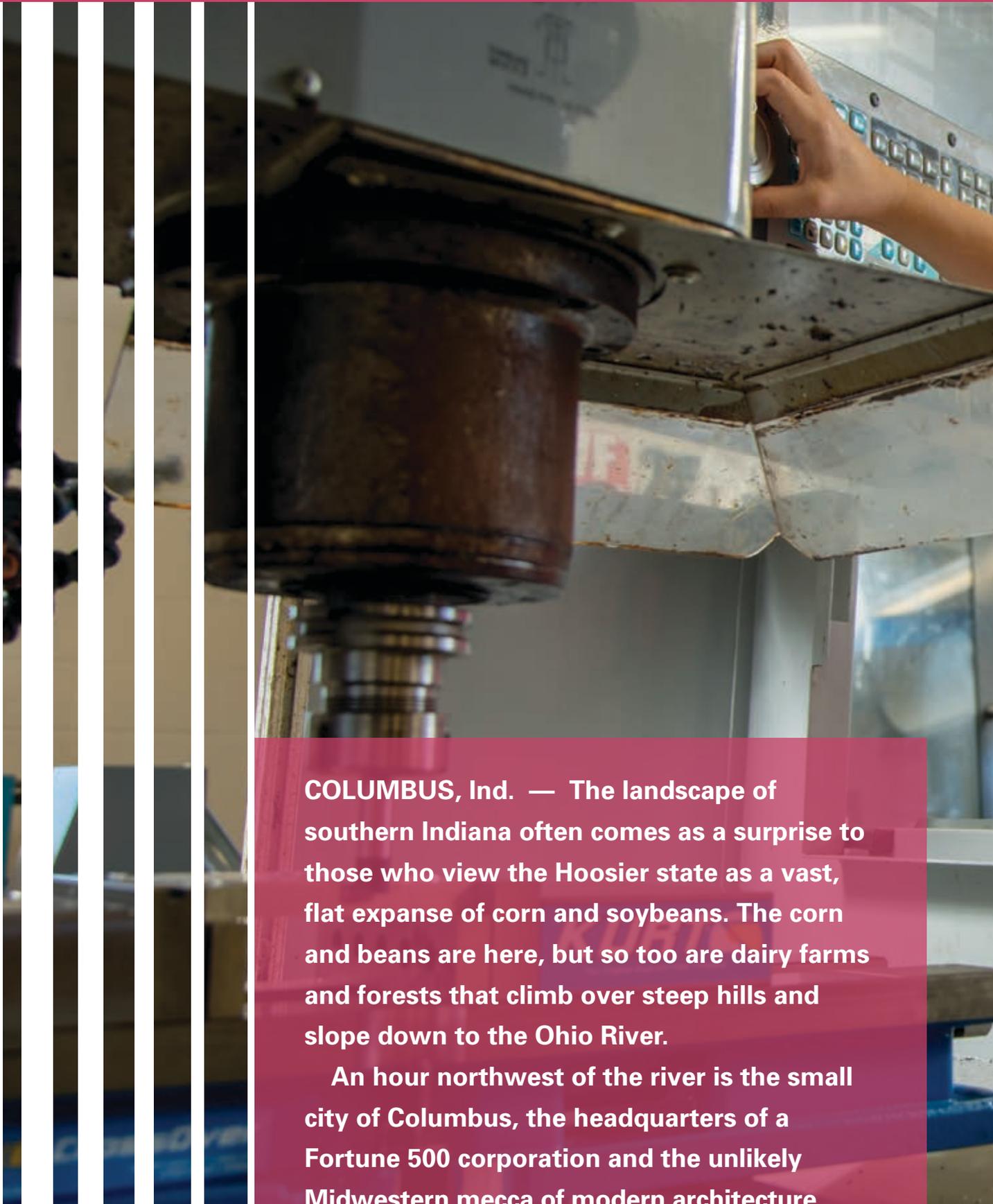
As to college attainment, the valley has set a highly ambitious goal (the same as the state's): to have 60 percent of its 25- to 34-year-olds earn a certificate or degree by 2030. In its K-12 districts, the region is already playing an outsized role in helping the state of Texas close the achievement gap between white and Latino students. It now looks to replicate and improve on those gains at the college level. ■



Under the eye of supervisor Jesus Bella Jr., Destiny Gomez replaces a belt on one of the buses owned by her school system in Lyford, Texas. She'll soon begin a post-high school program to earn her welding certification.



# Cultivating hope through education in



**COLUMBUS, Ind. —** The landscape of southern Indiana often comes as a surprise to those who view the Hoosier state as a vast, flat expanse of corn and soybeans. The corn and beans are here, but so too are dairy farms and forests that climb over steep hills and slope down to the Ohio River.

An hour northwest of the river is the small city of Columbus, the headquarters of a Fortune 500 corporation and the unlikely Midwestern mecca of modern architecture.

# the Hoosier hills



Amy Whittaker, 38, is an inmate at the Madison Correctional Facility in southern Indiana. But she's preparing for a better future in a program that allows her to leave the prison each weekday to work — and learn — at a local manufacturer, Grote Industries.

**Maria Hendrix of North Vernon, Indiana, shares a laugh with sons Alex (left) and Enrique. Like her sons, she recognizes the value of education beyond high school. She holds an associate degree and, at age 50, is working to earn two certifications — one as a health care assistant, the other as a medical translator.**





Cummins Inc.'s commitment to the community is everywhere — in the churches, schools, and parks, even the bridges and bicycle racks. Meanwhile, its factories are cranking out diesel engines at a pace that demands a full complement of 8,000 local employees. "If you aren't working in this area," said an instructor at a local community college, "it's because you don't want to."

That's an exaggeration, of course. There are plenty of reasons why adults in the region are unemployed or underemployed. In fact, this tidy city and its pastoral countryside belie a host of them: health problems, family problems, transportation problems, and, lately, drug addiction — a scourge that has ripped through these small towns with devastating results. Education levels in southeastern Indiana are remarkably low: In tiny Switzerland and Crawford counties, only 17 percent of adults have earned associate degrees (compared with 38 percent for the state overall), and a significant number lack even a high school diploma.

After years of grappling with these problems piecemeal, the counties and towns of southeastern Indiana are now tackling them in concert. The lever is education — specifically, connecting industries, educational institutions and social service agencies to help adults get not just bachelor's degrees, but associate degrees, industry certifications, and high school equivalency diplomas.

Until recently, there were few places these rural residents could go to advance their learning. Now a southeast Indiana network is working to expand postsecondary access by offering more classes through adult learning centers, aligning curriculum with business needs, and linking social services to adult education all in one place.

Known as Economic Opportunities Through Education, or EcO Network, the organization is part of a particularly longstanding collaborative.

## The EcO Network

Economic Opportunities Through Education works with Ivy Tech Community College and other education providers across 10 southeast Indiana counties to serve adults who lack college experience. By better linking partners and programs, the network seeks to boost educational attainment and prepare students for jobs in high-demand fields. Its parent, the Community Education Coalition, is supported by Cummins Inc. and is assisted by locally based CivicLab, a nationally recognized organization that helps other organizations adopt a culture of systems thinking and continuous improvement.

*More at: <https://econetworks.org/>*

The network's top priority is to prepare prospective workers for well-paying jobs in the manufacturing sector, which accounts for 30 percent of the area's economy, and in health care, which accounts for 10 percent.

A key component of the region's efforts is a series of pathways that clearly and deliberately connect students with more than 30 industry-recognized credentials and courses of study through branches of Ivy Tech, the state's community college system. Looking at the "map," an individual who wants to be a welder, for instance, can see clearly where he or she can pick up what credential, what related skills and competencies will be gained, what credits will be awarded and so on.

In this corner of Indiana, many miles can lie between residents, their schools, and their workplaces. The towns connect only by way of hilly, winding roads that can ice over in the winter or flood in the spring. Along the Ohio River, a deluge or a mudslide can shut down the only two-lane highway that links Madison and Lawrenceburg, causing detours for miles. And, in a problem rare for most of America, drivers in the town of Seymour, where two freight lines intersect, are routinely held up for 15 minutes or longer waiting for trains to pass. All these problems assume that students and employees have reliable cars to begin with — which they often don't.

So with residents unable to get to education and training, education and training has been coming closer to them.



**Once certified as a medical translator, Maria Hendrix hopes to use her Spanish-language skills to help guide immigrants through the health care system.**

With the support of local industries and a substantial grant from Lilly Endowment, the Columbus campus of Indiana University-Purdue University and Ivy Tech have expanded. And they have linked other organizations. In Seymour, 30 miles south of Columbus, the Jackson County Learning Center offers students two computer labs, a science lab, and facilities to train them in advanced manufacturing. An expanded Ivy Tech facility in Lawrenceburg, 70 miles east, has a welding shop and other facilities to prepare students for jobs in the area, 30 miles west of Cincinnati.

Between Seymour and Lawrenceburg, in Jennings County (population 27,600), just 21 percent of adults have at least an associate degree, and 15 percent lack even a high school diploma. For these people, there is the Jennings County Education Center in North Vernon.

## Old school, new schooling

The center, a former elementary school, features a training space where local residents in a wide age range prepare for jobs in advanced manufacturing, technology, engineering, and health care. Here students can train to be certified as production technicians — learning about quality control, measurement, maintenance, and environmentally sound practices. Or they can become certified as teaching assistants or licensed commercial truck drivers.

North Vernon resident Maria Hendrix, 50, raised three sons in Jennings County, managing to send them all to college. She holds an associate degree and for years has worked as a teaching assistant in the local schools. But she wants more financial security. So in connection with a local hospital, she is training at the North Vernon center to become a certified health care assistant, learning how to keep medical records, take vital signs, draw blood and the like. And because she speaks fluent Spanish, she is earning an additional certification as a medical translator, hoping to help immigrants navigate the health care system.

According to Director Jan Suding, 136 students have enrolled at the Jennings County center, 30 have passed the high school equivalency diploma test, and 21 have passed an occupational certification exam. "We are becoming a mini-college," Suding said. "Our parking lot is always full."

Teaching adults is also a passion of Sandra Bowlus, an instructor at the Education Center of Rising Sun (population 2,146), a quaint river town about an hour east of Columbus that has seen its fortunes rise and fall, then rise again, with the arrival of riverboat gambling. A former high school teacher, Bowlus proudly displays a binder of certifications earned by Indiana adults looking for a second chance.

One of these success stories is Amanda Eldridge, 36, who is taking certificate classes in cuisine and hospitality management at the education center in conjunction with the nearby Rising Star Casino Resort. A native of Rising Sun, Eldridge started college years ago at the University

*Continued on Page 40*



Southern Indiana native Amanda Eldridge, 36, is working to earn a certificate in cuisine and hospitality management. Her goal is to start her own food truck and serve down-home favorites like biscuits and gravy, fried chicken, and mashed potatoes. "I like to think of my customers as hungry, vulnerable men," she jokes.



Former high school teacher Sandra Bowlus (right), has a new calling: educating folks like Eldridge — adults who want to take their lives and careers in a new direction. Bowlus is an instructor at the Education Center of Rising Sun, a town on the Indiana side of the Ohio River, near Cincinnati.





**Amy Whittaker talks with Kevin Bradley, with whom she teaches manufacturing skills to some of her fellow inmates. Whittaker, who has earned certification as a production technician through Ivy Tech Community College, serves as a supplemental instructor for prison-based courses designed by the Manufacturing Skill Standards Council.**

*Continued from Page 36*

of Kentucky, but soon found that the Lexington campus clashed with her rural sensibilities.

"For someone from a small town, it was such a big place," Eldridge said. "I had to walk two miles a day." After briefly attending Cincinnati Mortuary School ("I'm not bothered by that stuff," she says), she received a grant and enrolled at the Rising Sun center. Working full time to manage a sandwich shop, she is now taking business classes and conducting market research to start her own food truck. Her plan is to specialize in comfort food: biscuits and gravy, fried chicken, and mashed potatoes. "I like to think of my customers as hungry, vulnerable men," she quipped.

As the far-flung EcO Network partners work in these small towns to create more flexible routes to college and careers, the ultimate goal for their constituents is to secure well-paying, family-sustaining jobs with good benefits. But sometimes, especially when students face personal obstacles, the immediate goal is for a job, period. And in these cases, the training and supports are far more basic.

Two programs in the historic river town of Madison, Rural Works! and The Clearinghouse, are working to provide that basic help. The programs, both projects of

a local nonprofit called River Valley Resources, have helped thousands of dislocated workers overcome multiple barriers — homelessness, hunger, child care issues, lack of training — to land minimum-wage jobs, setting them up for future jobs that will pay a lot more.

Workshops reinforce fundamentals such as showing up for work on time and dressing and behaving professionally — all behaviors that employers in this area no longer take for granted. From there, participants learn how to launch a job search, how to prepare a resumé, and how to interview with employers, including how to "share their baggage" if that's called for. They might even be prescribed a class in anger management.

One beneficiary of the program is Madison resident Matthew Stock. After a breakup with a girlfriend forced him out of their home, Rural Works! found him a room in a local boardinghouse. Within a week of graduating from the program, he had a job at a local restaurant and his own apartment. "It's a good feeling," Stock told a local newspaper. "I could have been homeless. But I was determined not to be."

So far this year, 90 people have graduated from the Rural Works! program; 73 percent have found jobs, and half

of the graduates have been employed longer than 90 days.

Though poverty is a huge barrier to educational advancement and gainful employment in the region, there is another, quite common obstacle that may be even higher. Well above 10 percent of Indiana's voting-age population has a felony conviction, considerably more than the nation overall. It's a stain that disqualifies Hoosiers from many jobs, including those that require licenses.

## From jails to jobs

But businesses in southeast Indiana are so hungry for qualified workers that many are willing to overlook a felony record for promising individuals. One such firm is Grote Industries, a \$70 million manufacturer of LED lighting components based in Madison. Its 500-employee plant is running at full capacity but, as with many in this region, it has trouble finding skilled workers who can reliably show up on time and pass a drug test. So it has looked to another source.

Amy Whittaker, 38, an inmate at the minimum-security Madison Correctional Facility, is serving her 17th year of a 22-year sentence for aiding and inducing murder. Her conviction stems from a drug-fueled robbery, perpetrated with others, that escalated badly. At the time

of the crime, Whittaker had just dropped out of Ivy Tech, where she had been studying graphic design. Originally sentenced to 50 years and confined to a maximum-security prison, she earned an online bachelor's degree in business management from Oakland City University.

Now at Madison, Whittaker is on work release, putting in eight hours at Grote during the day and returning to the prison at night. Through Ivy Tech, she has been certified as a production technician, and next year she expects to be certified in industrial maintenance.

"It's not easy; the classes are hard," she said. "The machines are complicated, and technology is scary for someone who has been incarcerated for so long." But when she is free, she'll be guaranteed a job that will allow her to live on her own for the first time in decades.

Andrew Garrett, a human resources specialist at Grote who works with the Madison inmates, said he couldn't be more satisfied with the arrangement, which has produced seven employees for the plant. The offenders are treated as any other worker, he says; the only difference is that the certification gives them an advantage for permanent jobs.

"They'll hit the ground running, and at a faster pace," he said. And because the women are under the supervision of the state corrections department, they are highly reliable — far more than typical workers, according to



**Konnie McCollum is director of adult education for River Valley Resources in Madison, a nonprofit that works to help dislocated workers and other disadvantaged residents rebuild their careers and lives. McCollum oversees a number of educational efforts, including a class that brings offenders from a local county jail to learn welding.**



Garrett. "My biggest issue is attendance. It's staggering, the biggest plague we have," he said. "We have 23 percent turnover for the industry and 30 percent for employees in the first year. But with these ladies, we don't have to worry."

A significant contributor to workplace absenteeism in this region, and throughout rural America, is drug abuse. The opioid crisis has hit southern Indiana particularly hard. In Clark and Floyd counties alone, according to researchers at the Columbus campus of Indiana University-Purdue University, drug addiction has cost

local businesses at least \$3.2 billion in lost productivity, not counting the toll it takes on public services. The Scott County town of Austin (population 4,259) recently earned the tragic distinction of being the center of the largest drug-use-related HIV outbreak in recent rural American history. Its 5 percent infection rate was comparable to that of several African nations, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control.

In North Vernon, as part of the EcO Network partnership, churches have been working with business leaders and local residents to create a recovery house to



**Kathy Huffman (left), director of the EcO Network, meets with project analyst Anissa Baker at the network's headquarters in Columbus, Indiana. Huffman stresses the importance of collaboration in the network's efforts. "It's all interconnected," she says. "It's all part of a system."**

help troubled men transition into training programs. Decatur Plastics Products, a manufacturer of custom-injected molded parts that is expanding its operations here, has funded the purchase of a building that will house up to 12 men who are homeless, ex-offenders, or overcoming drug addiction. The residents can earn credentials at the Jennings County Education Center, after which Decatur Plastics promises them a job interview. The company has even bought mopeds for the residents so that if they are hired, they will have transportation to work.

Like most of rural America, southeastern Indiana is overwhelmingly white. But it's also home to a fast-growing Latino population, and that adds language barriers to communities' list of needs. Jackson County's Seymour High School, for example, is now 25 percent Latino, with a significant population of native Guatemalans — who speak several different Mayan dialects. Translations can be difficult.

Transportation is, too. Not only is public transportation scarce here, but many immigrants don't drive because they lack documentation. So adults must often depend on a licensed 16-year-old relative to take them around, which only causes the child to miss school. "The value of their education is there, but the need for their help at home is higher," said Eduardo Martinez, general manager for remanufacturing at Cummins.

## Breaking the language barrier

McDowell Education Center in Columbus, which works with at-risk populations, has expanded its English language classes to other communities, serving Latino families in a novel, multi-generational way. Parents who want to enroll their children in a local free pre-kindergarten program must be working or going to school. The language classes let them meet that requirement, as do the English classes and mentoring that Su Casa Columbus offers to support Latino residents as they develop skills in advanced manufacturing. And Jobs for America's Graduates has started a bilingual program at Seymour High School.

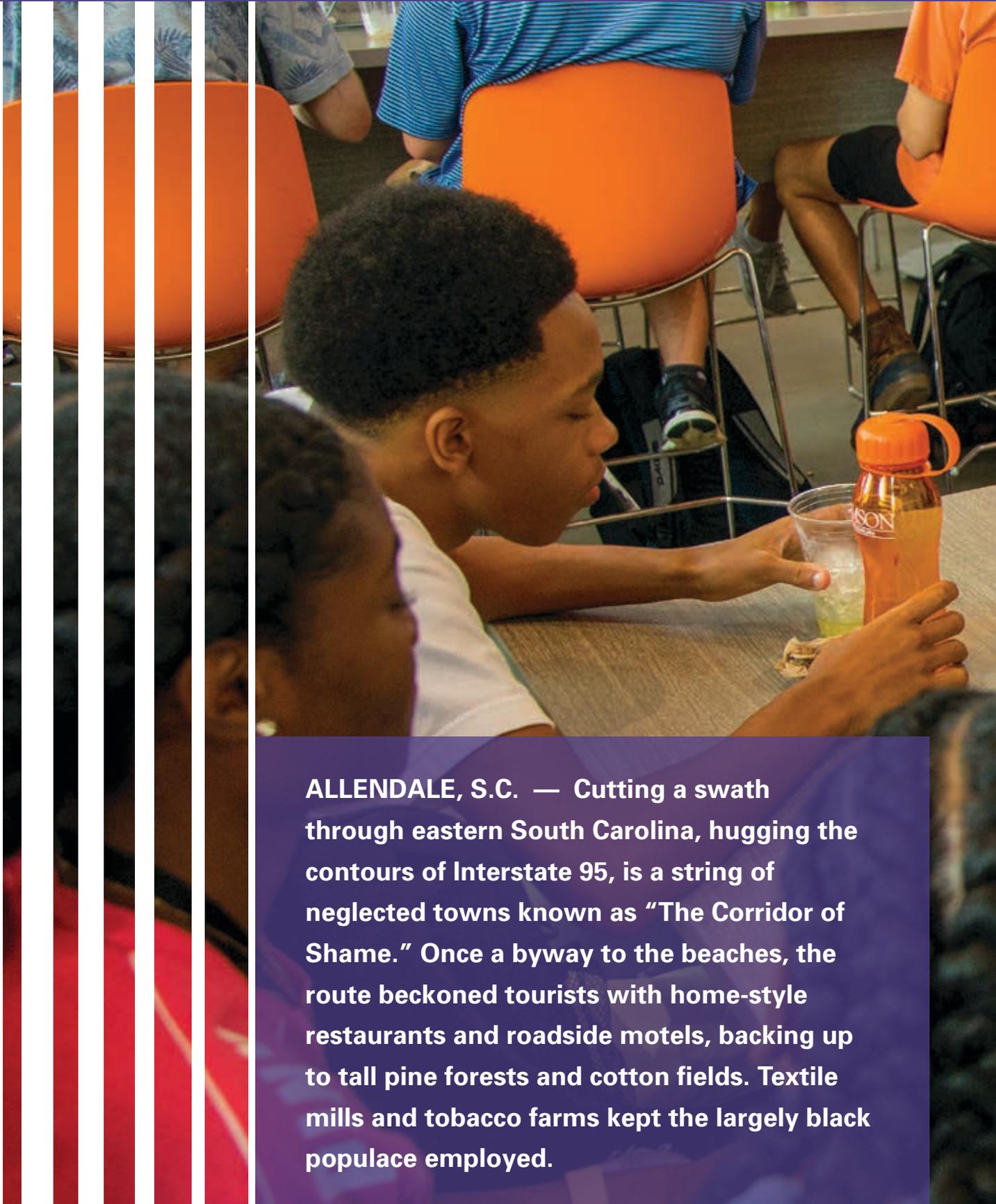
The community's goal in all of these efforts isn't merely to employ more Latino residents, but to aid the advancement of those who already have jobs. Says Kathy Huffman, director of the EcO Network: "It's all interconnected, it's all part of a system. We have to share because our resources are so limited in southern Indiana."

To help build an understanding of those connections, EcO Network and other organizations recently held a poverty-simulation exercise designed to illustrate the complexities and frustrations of living on the margins. Each of the 80 or so participants assumed a role and was assigned a scenario. For instance, a single mother with three young children, one of them sick, has a full-time shift job, car trouble, and a commute that's an hour each way. The dominoes fall: She can't find child care, she can't get to work, and she's fired for poor attendance.

The exercise "showed how all these factors affected employment [and education attainment], and it increased empathy," said Dan Davis, president of the Community Foundation of Jackson County. "It's been surprising to learn how many people don't even know how many low-income people there are in their communities."

That's a dangerous form of ignorance for any community — and one that southeast Indiana is working hard to eradicate. ■

# Clemson program gives rural students



**ALLENDALE, S.C. —** Cutting a swath through eastern South Carolina, hugging the contours of Interstate 95, is a string of neglected towns known as “The Corridor of Shame.” Once a byway to the beaches, the route beckoned tourists with home-style restaurants and roadside motels, backing up to tall pine forests and cotton fields. Textile mills and tobacco farms kept the largely black populace employed.

# 'a way to rise above'

Clemson University sophomore Jerome Polite Jr. leans into a discussion with a group of high school students he's mentoring this summer as part of a program called Emerging Scholars. The students, all rising sophomores from Polite's hometown of Allendale, South Carolina, are (clockwise, from Polite's left): Roe'Shelle Simpson, Kamari Williams, Rhodrianna Williams, Nyleia Doe, Caleb Capers, and Daniel Bravo.



But then the highway came, the mills closed, and the U.S. tobacco market collapsed. The result has been school districts so poor they can't even meet the state's standard of a "minimally adequate" education.

In 1993, multiple school districts sued the state, claiming that an inequitable funding formula, heavily reliant on local tax bases, deprived them of the resources they needed to maintain schools. Buildings routinely flooded with sewage, lacked air conditioning, and stocked library books dating back to the 1950s. In 2014, after prolonged trials and appeals, the South Carolina Supreme Court agreed.

Although the state has since poured millions into these schools, removing two from the ranks of the lowest-performing 10 percent, the changes are barely apparent. Visitors to the region still see miles of vacant storefronts, rusting trailers and patched-up homes. Nor are the changes noticeable in the academic numbers. "Divided by race, mired in inequities and hobbled by its history, South Carolina's public school system is among the worst in the nation," wrote Charleston's Post and

Courier recently, "saddled with a legacy of apathy and low expectations that threatens the state's newfound prosperity."

## Poverty vs. potential

Jerome Jr., Justin and Jalyn Polite, brothers from the impoverished farming town of Allendale (population 3,000) are all products of this system. For years they put up with chronic teacher shortages, limited curriculum, and antiquated computers in a county school system ranked among the five worst in the state. Although the district graduates 79 percent of its students, only 5 percent score well enough on tests to get into college. Having taken control of the school district for eight years once before, the state has taken it over again.

For graduates of a school system as broken as this, the options for the future have proven limited. But the Polite brothers have a way out.

Three hours northwest along the Georgia state line, in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, Clemson



The two younger brothers in the Polite family, Justin (far left) and Jalyn, stroll down the street in their hometown of Allendale, South Carolina, with their parents, Lotashia and Jerome Sr. Mrs. Polite is a teacher in the Allendale schools.

University reigns as the state's original land-grant research institution. With 24,000 students, Clemson is known for its charming campus, its rabid and generous alumni, and its powerhouse football team. It has a lot of numbers to be proud of, including its rise in college rankings, and one not to be: Although the state of South Carolina is more than 27 percent African-American, less than 7 percent of the Clemson student body is black.

Clemson has been working to improve that number by reaching out to the small towns in this deeply rural state. And one of its initiatives specifically targets students in the I-95 corridor. Known as Emerging Scholars, the program brings high school students to the Clemson campus every summer to help them establish a college-going mindset, giving them academic enrichment, one-on-one tutoring, and lessons in leadership. The aim is not necessarily to get students into Clemson (the in-state acceptance rate is 53 percent and declining), but to any college that suits them.

The program starts with rising high school sophomores. During the school year, they participate in test-taking

workshops and other college-readiness activities. Then, during the summer, they spend a week on the Clemson campus taking reading, writing, and math classes, tackling practical matters such as filling out the application for federal financial aid, and doing team-building exercises. As rising juniors, they go to campus for two weeks. Reading, writing, and math skills are reinforced; science classes are introduced, and students learn more about college access. Finally, the summer before their senior year, students go to Clemson for three weeks. Simulating a typical freshman schedule, they take five courses: English, math, social science, laboratory science, and art. They begin work on their college applications and take day trips to two colleges in Atlanta.

By the time students enroll at Clemson or elsewhere, they are familiar, even comfortable, with college culture, both socially and academically. This sense of belonging, said program head Amber Lange, is what so many minority, low-income, and first-generation students lack, and yet it is key to their persisting and earning a degree.

Justin Polite, a first-year business management student



at Clemson, says the Emerging Scholars staff and fellow scholars smoothed his transition to college. "In high school I got comfortable with not studying," he said. "At Emerging Scholars, they push me. And when I have a problem, I know they will help me out. You feel at home, because you're with people who relate to you."

Justin's brother Jerome, a Clemson sophomore who is also majoring in management, was first attracted to the college by football, which he played in high school. "I at first didn't want to go (to the summer program) because I wanted to go to football camp," he said. "Then I thought maybe it wouldn't be too bad to think about academics."

His mother, a teacher in the Allendale schools, told all of her sons while they were in high school: "There is nothing for you here. You can't stay here." Jerome, who is now on a full scholarship at Clemson (which is offered to all Emerging Scholars who gain admittance), calls the college "a dream school."

The youngest Polite brother, Jalyn, a high school junior, is also an Emerging Scholar. On campus this summer, he benefits from the mentoring of people like William Mitchell, himself a former Scholar and now a student at Clemson.

Like the Polite brothers, Mitchell came from a struggling district, Estill (population. 1,834), where he said: "Students are not getting the advice they need or the exposure." But his mother, a teacher, told him that, even if his school was the bottom of the barrel, he'd at least be at the top of it. "I learned how to teach myself, and

when I got to Clemson, I had to catch up on what I missed in high school," he says. In the summer program, reading college-level material, he got tips on how to study, how to improve his writing, and how to apply math to real life. He learned, as he puts it, "a way to rise above Estill."

## 'All eyes were on me'

There is no escaping that the "I-95 students" are often the only students of color in a Clemson class or at a social gathering. Justin Polite recalled walking into a lecture hall with more than 300 classmates and his being the only black face. "I felt all their eyes were on me," he said. "Sometimes you feel you don't belong here. You've got to have thick skin."

Mitchell agreed. "It was different. People there have a different outlook on life," he said. "The jokes I made, they didn't get. But the summer program taught me how to interact with all kinds of people."

Since Emerging Scholars started in 2002, more than 850 students have passed through the program, and all have graduated from high school. Ninety percent have gone on to college or joined the military immediately afterward. "When no one in your family has gone to college, this says you can go," Mitchell pointed out. "It says that even if you live in a really small town, you can succeed. We were worn out every night, and it was a lot to pack in. But it was worth it." ■



**William Mitchell (center), cuts up on campus with fellow students Jessica Davis and Keshawn Orr. Mitchell, who grew up in tiny Estill, South Carolina, came through the Emerging Scholars program and is now thriving at Clemson. He says the program helped him find "a way to rise above."**



Amber Lange, who directs the Emerging Scholars program, welcomes a group of more than 70 rising high school sophomores from seven schools who participated in the on-campus program this summer. For the second year, Clemson provided each student with a laptop to use during the program.



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