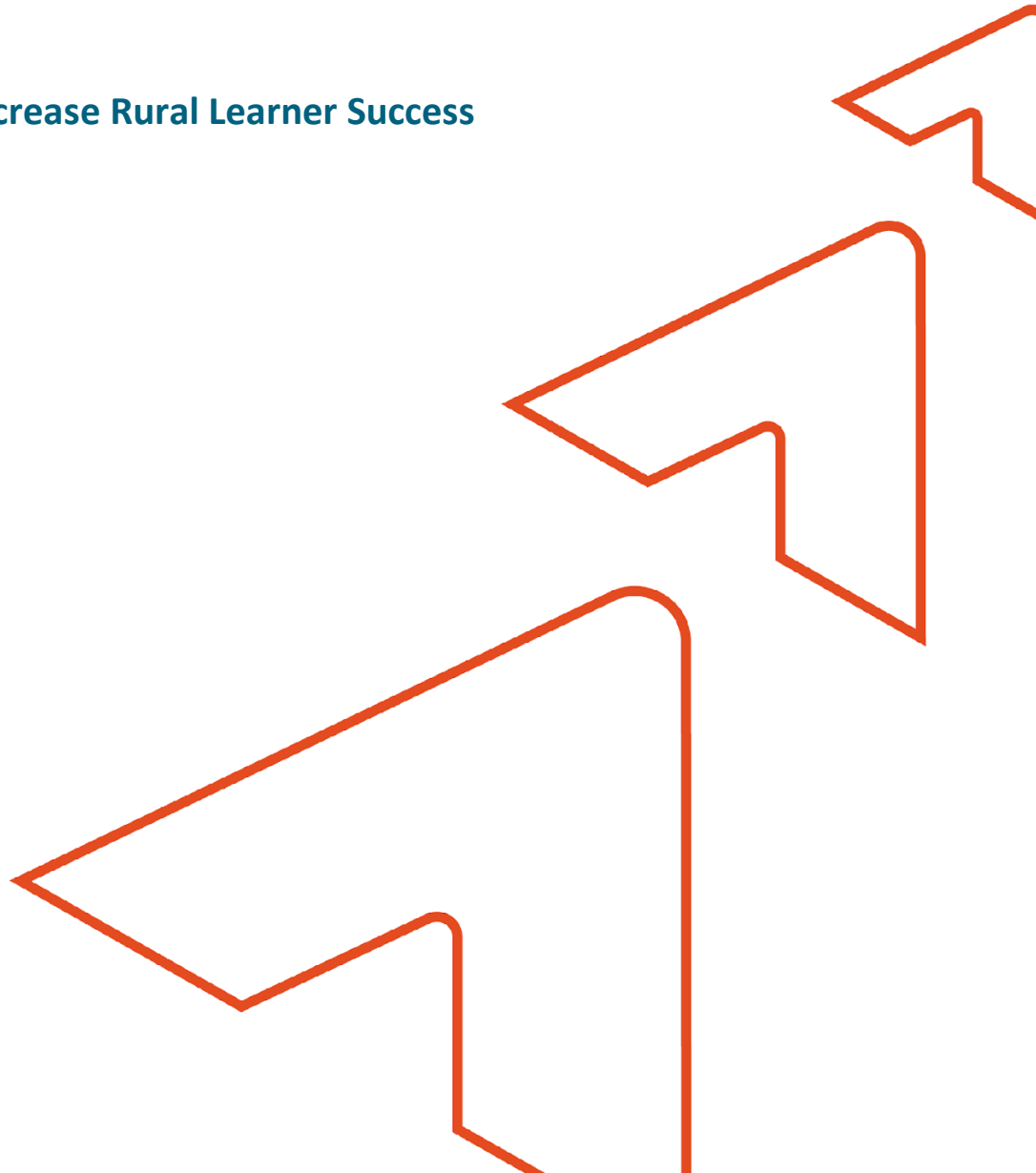


Project Summary

Mapping Effective Mentorship for Rural Community College Students

Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success



Mapping Effective Mentorship for Rural Community College Students

University of Washington | Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI) | Seattle, WA

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My mentors have been avid supporters of my college experiences holistically as well as academically. They cater to the needs of every individual seeking their support and remain humble enough to share their personal life experiences and barriers that they go through as college students. Their roles in the college setting are vital in my journey at [my community college].

– Student mentee | Rural-serving community college

Project Overview

This project focused on understanding mentorship strategies at public rural-serving community colleges across the United States. The findings from this project advance our understanding of how mentorship is implemented and experienced and how evidence-based approaches can support rural learners.

Research Objectives Achieved

1. Identified and described the types of mentoring programs currently implemented at public rural-serving community colleges and determined which student populations these programs serve.
2. Explored how student support practitioners and students at rural-serving institutions perceived and experienced existing mentorship opportunities.
3. Explored students' perspectives on how mentorship experiences influenced their academic performance and career trajectories.
4. Identified strategies used by public rural-serving institution practitioners to engage students and implement evidence-based best practices for mentorship, particularly for those from low-income backgrounds.

Research Methodology

CCRI conducted a multisite, three-stage, mixed methods study to better understand student mentorship at rural-serving community colleges across the United States. The study draws on data collected from institutional websites, interviews with staff and students, and student surveys.

Key Findings

- Of the 444 public rural-serving community colleges identified in this study, 301 (67%) offered at least one mentorship program. While some programs focused on specific demographic groups, only one explicitly focused on rural students. Most programs tailored to students from low-income backgrounds were federally funded, often falling under one of the TRiO programs. Forty-four mentoring programs described specific supports informed by the differences experienced by low-income and otherwise minoritized students.
- Rural students indicated that mentorship was often a turning point in their academic and career trajectories, helping them clarify their goals, explore their options, and connect to resources and opportunities.
- Mentorship plays a critical role in supporting rural college students. Mentorship is most effective when it emphasizes relational trust, authentic connections, and responsiveness to local rural communities, cultural contexts, and material realities.
- Challenges may arise when rural mentors and mentees do not share similar identities and/or ties to the rural community, which can impact the quality of the relationship. Programs that incorporate culturally responsive and critical mentorship practices can help mitigate these challenges by affirming students' identities and lived experiences. This includes working with the broader community and discussing mentee goals in terms of how their responsibilities and aspirations may be tied to their identity and culture.
- Where possible, co-recruitment and interconnected programming between mentoring programs and other on-campus support resources and programs can maximize the benefits of limited funding and personnel, as well as benefit students.
- Engaging students in mentorship programs requires approaches that account for students' work, caregiving, and family commitments, as well as clear, accessible communication and flexible participation models.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- Conduct a needs assessment to identify specific challenges faced by rural students at the institution and incorporate regular feedback from both mentors and mentee mentoring practices.
- Prepare and support mentors for the often more relational, mutual, and personal mentoring dynamic expected in rural areas through training on cultural sensitivity, trauma-informed care, and context-specific strategies to strengthen relationships—especially with students who do not share similar identities. This may include relationship continuity plans when changes in mentor assignments occur that ensure a new deep relationship is growing before the prior mentor departs.
- Leverage the cultural assets and strengths present in the rural community (Community Cultural Wealth) by partnering with institutional and community organizations. This collaborative approach maximizes resources in resource-limited settings while aligning supports with what is most central to students' motives for credential completion.

Resources

For more information on this project, please see:

- [Rural Community College Students' Perspectives on Mentorship and Academic and Career Outcomes](#) (2026)
- [An Adaptive Rural-Responsive Mentorship Model: Insights from Students, Practitioners, and College Leaders](#) (2025)
- [Critical Mentorship Strategies for Supporting Rural Community College Students](#) (2024)
- [Landscape of Mentorship Programs at Rural Serving Community Colleges](#) (2023)