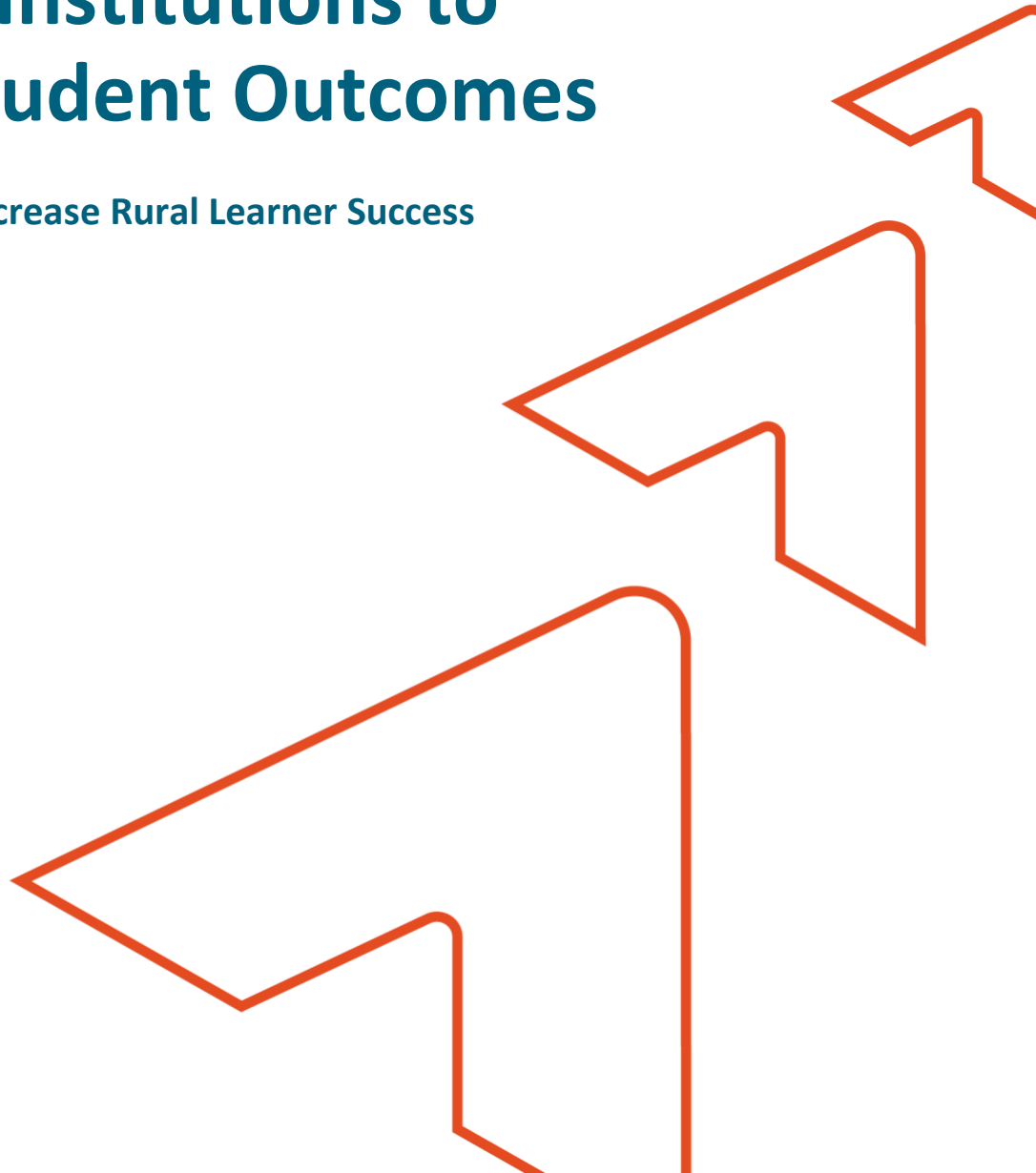


Project Profile

# Rural College Leaders Program: Catalyzing Institutions to Improve Student Outcomes

Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success



# Rural College Leaders Program: Catalyzing Institutions to Improve Student Outcomes

## Organization

Belk Center for Community College Leadership, North Carolina State University | Raleigh, NC

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## Geographic Focus

North Carolina

## Population Focus

The Rural College Leaders Program (RCLP) supports 10 rural-serving community colleges to develop the skills needed to empirically study and support enrollment, persistence, and completion among historically underserved populations, including adult, Black, Latinx, Indigenous learners, and learners from low-income backgrounds.

## Project Overview

While rural community colleges are fixtures in their communities, little research exists on ways to support rural leaders as they navigate the challenges of leading community colleges within their unique geographic and demographic contexts. RCLP strengthens capacity at participating community colleges by equipping their presidents, senior leadership teams, and trustees with vital knowledge and support to realize equitable student outcomes at their institutions.

Through a formative evaluation of RCLP, the Belk Center will investigate the efficacy of approaches they use to help program participants identify and prioritize institutional equity gaps; participants’ perceived benefits of convenings and other modes of engagement among RCLP participants; and successes and challenges they face when trying to implement RCLP learnings. The Belk Center will also assess the impact of newly implemented policies and practices on student enrollment and retention at the 10 participating rural colleges using administrative data from the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS).

RCLP equips North Carolina community college presidents and their senior leadership teams with tools, information, and strategies to improve student outcomes and advance equity at their rural institutions. This project aims to remove barriers and close opportunity gaps in persistence and completion for learners from low-income backgrounds and those living in rural communities with an evidence-based approach.

– *Belk Center at North Carolina State University*

## Research Questions

1. What approaches are most effective for helping rural college leaders identify and implement policies and practices specific to low-income, adult, and racially minoritized students?
  - a. Which administrative leaders in the college are involved in identifying and prioritizing needs through RCLP (e.g., executive, student success, institutional research)?
  - b. What equitable policy and practice changes are implemented as a result of RCLP participation?
  - c. What Belk Center resources and supports (e.g., data coaches) are deemed most useful in driving institutional policy and practice change?
2. What are the effects of policy and practice changes on student enrollment, retention, and completion among the 10 participating rural colleges?
  - a. What is the intent of the policy or practice change in terms of equitable student outcomes? Is the policy or practice change targeted for specific groups (e.g., adults, racialized minorities, low-income students, dual enrollment students)?
  - b. Did the policy or practice change improve enrollment or retention outcomes for students at these rural and rural-serving community colleges?

## Research Methodology

The Belk Center will use mixed methods to examine processes for implementing equity-focused policies and practices at RCLP institutions and to begin to measure the impact of these policies and practices. The team will use interviews, focus groups, document review, and surveys to assess the Belk Center's methods for helping RCLP participants identify and prioritize institutional equity gaps that result in equitable policy and practice changes.

With findings from the qualitative analysis, the Belk Center will identify three to four policies or practices to study further. To assess the impact of newly implemented policies and practices on student enrollment and retention, the team will examine administrative data from the NCCCS, using difference-in-differences analysis to compare treatment and comparison groups before and after the policy or practice occurs. To disseminate its findings, the Belk Center will publish a final report, present findings at conferences, and develop toolkits for RCLP participants and other rural community colleges in North Carolina and elsewhere.

## **Research Significance**

Through these efforts, the Belk Center anticipates strengthening the impact of RCLP with its partner colleges and increasing the implementation of evidence-based strategies or promising practices for closing equity gaps. In addition, the Belk Center will share lessons learned with a broader audience within North Carolina and in other rural-serving community colleges in other states.

## **Grant Period of Performance**

March 2023 to February 2026