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VISION STATEMENT

The role of rural community colleges

Community colleges are at a pivotal point in our evolution. Over time, we have served as a vehicle of opportunity for many populations, providing access to transformative education to help students develop into engaged citizens and advance social and economic mobility. While our audience and public support have ebbed and flowed, we are experiencing a renewed moment of relevance as the nation has become acutely aware of the importance of affordability in both liberal arts and technical education to sustain an educated citizenry and a talented workforce. In this context, community colleges have become more important than ever. No other sector of higher education is as focused on academic excellence while also being equipped to meet highly diverse student populations where they are. We embrace the opportunity and responsibility of educating students who are disproportionately individuals of color, income-limited, neurodiverse, and the first in their families to attend college.

Rural-serving community colleges do this work within a unique context, often serving communities that are place-bound, economically challenged, and geographically isolated. These regions often face limited access to resources and cultural opportunities, lower educational attainment, declining populations, and significant workforce fluctuations. At the same time, rural communities possess extraordinary strengths - authenticity, connection, history, resilience, and a deep sense of shared responsibility. They depend on our institutions not only for education, but also as cultural, civic, and economic hubs that bring people together, celebrate creativity and learning, and anchor community life.

Our institutions have both the privilege and responsibility of ensuring that our work is fundamentally about strengthening the communities we serve. This requires a deep connection to place and an understanding that programs, supports, and people must intentionally meet the needs of rural students and families, as well as the unique region. It also means confronting persistent challenges, including enrollment pressures, resource-limited environments, skepticism about the value of higher education, and the growing complexity of student needs. For these reasons, serving rural communities demands a leadership philosophy rooted in relationships, inclusion, and community, values that guide my approach to community college education.

At our core, students are our reason for being; they inspire us. They come to our institutions with many gifts and challenges. They must often balance work, financial pressures, struggle with basic needs, and juggle many complicated responsibilities as parents, caregivers, and employees. Yet, they find a way to prioritize education in the context of such complicated lives. Given the life-changing decisions that often bring them to us, our colleges must serve as hubs of support, connection, and possibility. We must meet them where they are, see and know the whole student, and commit to being “student-ready” colleges. This requires thoughtful academic design, inclusive teaching practices, proactive advising, holistic wrap-around supports, and an engaging student experience that fosters relationship, belonging, and resilience.

Ultimately, my vision for community colleges, and for Berkshire Community College in particular, is one grounded in purpose and place. By centering equity, investing in people, and remaining

deeply connected to the communities we serve, rural-serving community colleges can continue to transform lives, strengthen regions, and build futures for generations to come.