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Texas is big in population and geography. The state comprises 268,597 square miles. With more than 27 million residents, Texas is home to two of the top 10 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) in the United States with another two in the top 50—a big state with big cities (United States Department of Labor, 2010). Spread between its great cities, Texas has a larger rural population than any other state in absolute numbers, with 3.8 million rural residents including nearly 1 million rural K-12 students (Greater Texas Foundation, 2016).

Enter Texas on Interstate-10 (I-10) from New Mexico at the farthest western tip of the state and you will quickly find yourself in El Paso, a large city on its own and a major metro area of more than 2.5 million residents, if you consider its Mexican sister city, Ciudad Juarez. Keep driving east on I-10 and you will soon reach the end of El Paso County, the largest city for about 500 miles. The next eight hours of the trip will be mostly desert, with small towns dotted along the route. You can find similar expanses of rural Texas across the state traveling north, south, east, and west.

Just as Austin and Dallas/Fort Worth or Houston and San Antonio have their own unique cultures, populations, and identities, so do Texas's rural regions. There is not one "rural Texas." Rural East is very different from rural West, which is different from rural South. Populations are diverse, from colonias along the international border with Mexico to isolated oil-production dependent communities in far West Texas (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2016).

In fact, even definitions of rural vary greatly by proximity to metro areas. According to the Texas Legislative Council (2016), there are 45 varying definitions of rural in Texas laws and agency rules. The variation in definitions has implications for policy and practice for rural Texas; policies and programs focused on any issue should certainly take definitional as well as cultural differences into account. There are challenges of rural communities, though—particularly with respect to education and higher education that cut across the varying cultures and definitions of rural Texas.

Overall, rural populations are more impoverished than urban populations in Texas; however, public and private investment is historically low. According to the Carsey School of Public Policy (2016), rural children are twice as likely as urban children to live in the vicinity of persistent high child poverty. In fact, based on 2010 census data, "nearly two-thirds (64%) of rural U.S. counties had high child poverty, compared to just 47 percent of urban counties" (Schaefer, Mattingly, & Johnson, 2016, p. 1). In spite of these numbers, "the overwhelming focus of welfare programs is urban" (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 6). Similarly, private philanthropy underinvests in rural areas. According to a recent United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) report, grants to rural-based organizations accounted for 5.5% of the real value of grants from the largest 1,200-1,400 foundations from 2005-2010. When smaller foundations are included, rural grant dollars rose to a 7.5% share (Pender, 2015). In 2010, the rural U.S.

population was 19% of the total population. Given the size of the rural population and under investment by foundations, one could naturally conclude there is an urban focus in most foundations' grantmaking.

Across the state, Texas students have poor postsecondary outcomes, with only one in five Texas students completing any type of postsecondary credential within six years of graduation. This percentage is even less for traditionally underserved student populations, such as low income, Latino/a, and Black students—including those in rural areas (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, n.d.). In general, rural students complete postsecondary credentials at a lower rate than students in urban areas of the state (Chen, Hall, Jackson, Liu, Morin, Sargent, & Steere, 2014).

In addition to low completion rates, there are other education challenges rural students face due to geography: access (geographic proximity) to institutions of higher education, transportation, and broadband access, to name a few (Chen et al., 2014). There are issues of scale – educational improvements can be difficult to implement and oftentimes difficult to staff, particularly with respect to attracting new talent. Similarly, there are challenges with teacher availability and retention in certain subject areas, particularly in the STEM fields. Further, according to interviews from Greater Texas Foundation's strategic planning process, rural communities face many challenges beyond, but integrally connected to, education, including lack of living-wage jobs, rural economic development, and industrial development (Greater Texas Foundation, 2016).

Although the challenges are considerable, a foundation with resources allocated for education can have an important and positive impact on rural students. Examples of ways foundations can work with rural regions to improve student outcomes are outlined below. The recommendations also have implications for practitioners and scholars in thinking about addressing education challenges in rural areas:

Ensure availability of opportunities and initiatives which may not otherwise be accessible or geared to rural regions and colleges. For example, Greater Texas Foundation worked with the Center for Community College Student Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin to create Student Success by the Numbers (SSBTN). With some conceptual similarities to the national Achieving the Dream initiative, SSBTN provided support and coaching for small, rural community colleges to use student data to inform institutional strategy, processes, and decision making (Center for Community College Student Engagement, n.d.). Another example is the Texas Regional STEM Degree Accelerator (STEM Accelerator) in which multiple metro regions of the state developed partnerships between school districts, higher education, and workforce to increase STEM pathways based on local workforce needs (Educate Texas, n.d.). Through its financial support, GTF ensured there was a rural region included in this mostly metro-focused initiative.

Provide financial support for work that can be expensive on a per student basis. Because work in rural communities can be expensive on a per-student basis, foundations with a rural focus are perfectly positioned to provide financial support for low-resourced school districts and institutions of higher education. Foundations have the flexibility to be creative and work with rural communities to use all resources available, including online platforms to provide education opportunities in a systemic way to rural students.

Help rural communities create economies of scale in education. In rural communities there is both a need and an opportunity to develop collaborative partnerships that allow small districts and colleges to share resources and develop economies of scale. An example of this is

the Lee College Dual Credit Institute, in which multiple rural districts partnered with Lee College to create technical dual credit opportunities for students that would not otherwise have access (Lee College, n.d.).

Provide focus to a population that is often overlooked. Foundations are well positioned to use their voice to include rural areas in policy and state-level discussions and initiatives. In Texas, for example, the higher education strategic plan has encouraged alignment between state priorities for postsecondary credential attainment and strengthened higher education outcomes for rural students (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2015).

Hit the road. A final recommendation for anyone interested in learning about rural Texas: hit the road. Literally. It is impossible to fully understand the “ruralness” of rural Texas until you experience it firsthand. Drive for 45 minutes outside any major metro area, turn onto the next Farm-to-Market road you see, and explore a little around the dirt roads and fields – the magnitude of this great state truly comes alive.

These recommendations present an apparent throughline, that is, how foundations and others can highlight rural access and education opportunities as an issue of equity. In areas with historically low public and private investments, foundations can serve as key partners to bolster education and economic outcomes and provide a voice in the field, advocating for inclusion of rural students in conversations, policies, and initiatives in which they may not otherwise be included.

In a big state with a big and diverse rural population, it is critical to include rural Texas communities and institutions in work that is focused on improving outcomes for students. Foundations and other organizations with a focus on improving Texas education and economic outcomes would be remiss to exclude rural students. Rural students are an important and strategic population for many reasons, and there are multiple ways for foundations to approach rural work that will result in substantive, systemic, and lasting outcomes.

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