



Reconsidering Rural

Toward a More Expansive Understanding of Rural-Serving Community Colleges in California

Mayra Nuñez Martinez

RURAL COMMUNITIES EXIST in all of California's 58 counties but one: San Francisco.¹ Yet based on narrow national and federal definitions, only a small number of California's 116 community colleges are formally identified as rural or rural-serving.² Community college leaders have long raised concerns about this identification gap and its consequences³ because the lack of formal identification obscures the realities of institutions serving rural regions and restricts access to funding, including federal programs and resources for rural communities.

Rural college leaders in Northern California have noted that statewide funding formulas often do not account for the high costs associated with maintaining access across large geographic service areas.⁴ These costs are shaped by systemic barriers that have long limited education access: geographic isolation, limited options for higher education, and higher operational costs.⁵ The state's rural grant allocation supports a limited number of eligible single-college community college districts under current criteria, with just over \$2 million allocated per district.⁶ Colleges serving rural communities or agricultural areas that do not meet these eligibility requirements, including those within multicollege districts, do not receive this rural adjustment.

To better understand how community colleges serve rural students, this brief examines the limitations of the existing definitions of *rural*, proposes a more expansive understanding of "rural-servingness,"⁷ and uses that framework to explore how institutions across the state connect with and educate students in rural communities. Drawing on institutional websites, materials, and other public documents, I identified 40 community colleges statewide that describe serving rural or agricultural regions—the majority of which are not designated as rural or rural-serving based on national and federal classifications. This number reflects a starting point for identifying rural-serving community colleges, as additional colleges may serve rural communities in ways not captured here. This brief builds on existing definitions of *rural-servingness* to propose a broader definition that includes institutions that serve geographically dispersed rural or agricultural regions and that function as primary providers of postsecondary access, workforce preparation, and educational mobility for students in those communities.

TOPLINES

- > An analysis of institutional materials reveals a substantial number of California community colleges that serve rural communities but go unrecognized as rural or rural-serving under existing classifications.
- > Community college leaders describe consequences of this recognition gap, including limited access to funding and program requirements that overlook the challenges of serving vast, under-resourced regions.
- > This brief calls for a statewide understanding of rural-servingness, developed with rural community college leaders and grounded in the realities of the students and communities they serve.



What Is Rural? The Limits of Existing Definitions

Currently, there is no consensus on what *rural* means, making it difficult to assess the needs of rural community colleges.⁸ Definitions of *rural* applied nationally and at the state level often exclude institutions that primarily serve rural students but are located in areas that are not classified as rural, highlighting a need for a broader understanding of *rural* and *rural-serving* that is grounded in the realities of the communities that these colleges serve.⁹

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) uses quantitative measures drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau to classify colleges into one of four locale types: city, suburb, town, and rural.¹⁰ A college is classified into a rural locale if it is located outside an urban area, with rural locales further subdivided by distance from and size of the nearest urban center.¹¹ Using these criteria, NCES identifies 16 California community colleges as rural. The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) developed the rural-serving institution (RSI) metric to expand how rurality is understood, considering factors such as the rural population share of a college's home county and surrounding counties, county population size, proximity to a metropolitan area, and share of credentials awarded in agriculture, natural resources, and parks and recreation.¹² Using this approach, nine California community colleges meet the rural-serving threshold, defined as an RSI score above the national average of 1.175 on a scale of 0–4. This is fewer than the number of rural community colleges identified by NCES, suggesting that even efforts to broaden definitions of *rural* and *rural-serving* may not always capture the full range of institutions serving rural communities in California.

While these classifications provide a nationally comparable way to identify rural locales, they don't capture how California's community colleges themselves define their rural-service regions or the students they serve. Moreover, these national definitions often overlook the rural realities of colleges that are classified as urban or suburban but serve large rural or agricultural regions. For example, in regions like the San Joaquin Valley, students connect rural-servingness with colleges that maintain strong ties to farmworking communities, foster culturally familiar environments, and cultivate a sense of belonging.¹³

Identifying California's Rural-Serving Community Colleges

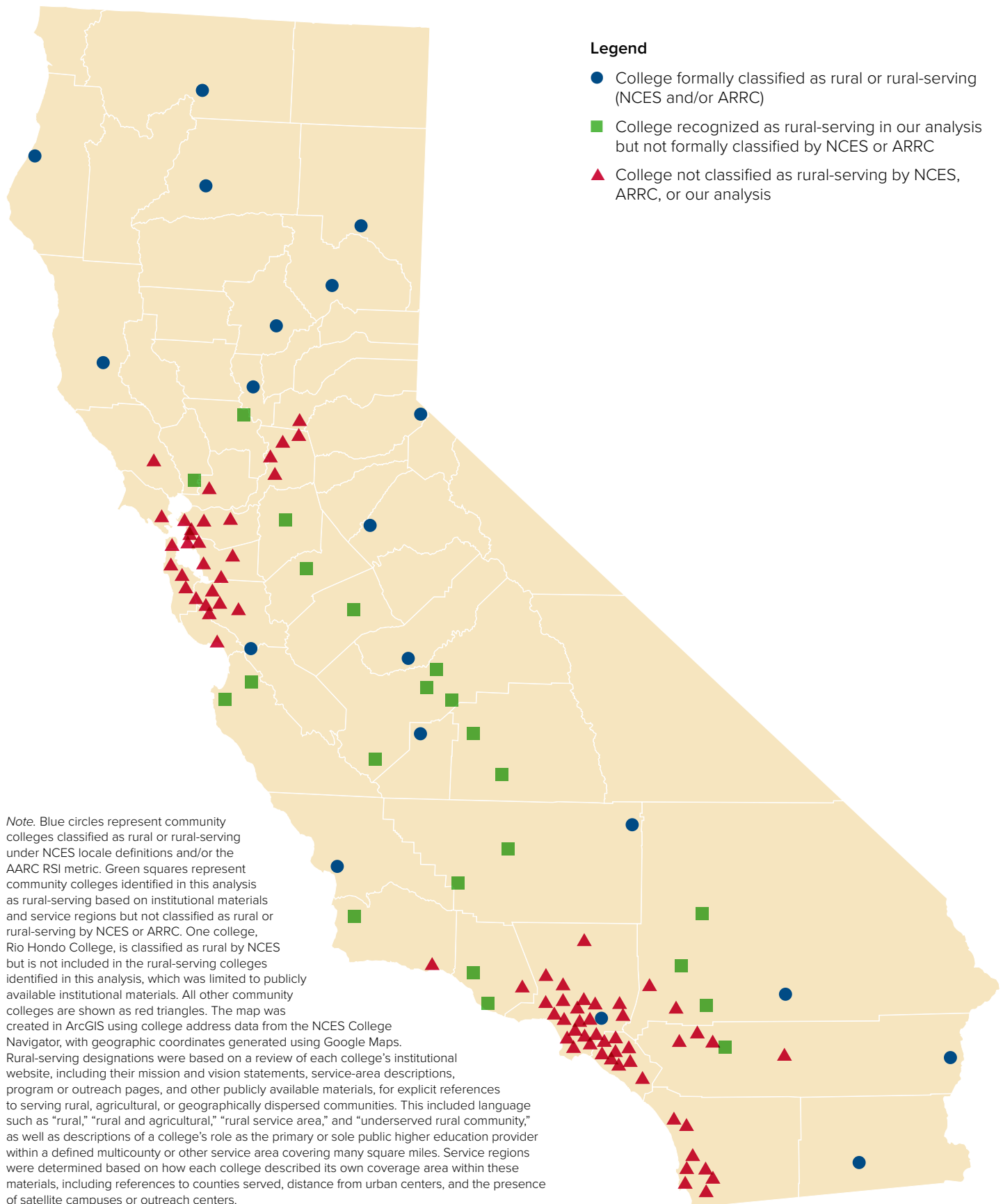
To contribute to a broader understanding of rural-servingness in California, I examined how community colleges express their commitment to rural regions, including through their mission and vision statements, descriptions of service areas that include agricultural or geographically isolated communities, and programs designed to meet rural local needs, such as workforce partnerships, mobile career centers, and outreach in farmworking towns. Figure 1 shows all 115 California community colleges included in this analysis. Of these, I identify 40 as rural-serving, which are shown in blue and green. From these 40, 18 are also classified as rural or rural-serving by NCES and/or ARRC (blue circles), while the remaining 22 are not captured by either classification (green squares). The table in the Appendix provides additional institutional context, including NCES locale classifications for reference and distances to the nearest California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) campuses.

Because this analysis used information from institutional websites, it may exclude community colleges that self-identify as rural-serving or use indicators of rural-servingness not reflected in their institutional materials or identified in this analysis. While it may not capture every element that defines rural-servingness in practice, it offers some considerations to make visible the many community colleges that serve rural students and regions despite not being formally recognized as rural.

Across these colleges, several features illustrate how rural-servingness shows up in practice:

- serving wide geographic regions that include small towns and remote communities as the primary local provider of higher education and a major employer
- aligning academic, workforce, and transfer pathways with rural and agricultural economies and needs, including agriculture, construction management, industrial technology, mining, clean energy, and rural health care programs that are tied to regional labor markets
- expanding outreach and access across service regions through satellite centers, outreach in farmworking communities, English language instruction, and mobile or community-based services

Figure 1. Rural-Serving Community Colleges in California



How Rural-Serving Colleges Meet Community Needs: Four Examples

The four colleges highlighted in this brief illustrate how these patterns take shape in different institutional and geographic contexts. Three of these institutions—Allan Hancock College, Bakersfield College, and Hartnell College—are not classified as rural or rural-serving by either NCES or ARRC. Shasta College is recognized as rural-serving by ARRC but is not classified as rural under NCES locale definitions.

Allan Hancock College (NCES Locale—City: Midsize)

Located in the central coast city of Santa Maria, Allan Hancock College¹⁴ serves a “largely rural and agricultural region of California’s South Central Coast” and is a Hispanic-serving institution and Hispanic-serving agricultural college and university. Allan Hancock College is the only community college provider for northern Santa Barbara County and operates across three primary locations, including two satellite centers that expand outreach and access to small agricultural towns and communities that are geographically isolated.



In partnership with agricultural industry partners across the Santa Maria Valley, Allan Hancock College has developed its agriculture program to prepare students for careers tied to the regional economy, including agribusiness, crop advising, irrigation, pest management, soil science, and farm and ranch management. These efforts are complemented by workforce partnerships, such as Ser-Jobs for Progress, which supports employment pathways for students from rural and low-income communities and advertises itself in both English and Spanish.

Bakersfield College (NCES Locale—City: Large)

Bakersfield College¹⁵ serves communities across the Central Valley’s Kern County through its main campus in the city of Bakersfield and several satellite campuses located in rural and agricultural communities. Bakersfield College’s Rural Initiatives program aims to increase enrollment of students from rural communities by expanding instruction, early college pathways, and student support services across rural and remote areas. These initiatives include permanent education centers, farmworker programs like Bakersfield College in the Vineyards, partnerships with rural high schools, and expanded access to advising, counseling, basic needs support, and enrollment assistance through in-person, mobile, hybrid, and remote formats.



Academic and workforce programs offered through rural sites are aligned with regional industries, including HVAC, construction management, sustainable agriculture, industrial technology and automation, and health care, and they are supported by investments in technology infrastructure to address barriers to accessing internet and broadband connectivity. Across these initiatives, Bakersfield College works closely with school districts, employers, and community organizations to align education and training with local workforce needs and create accessible pathways to employment in rural communities, including by developing pipelines to increase the number of rural students pursuing pathways in health sciences and by expanding noncredit certificates in areas such as occupational safety, child development, English for multilingual students, and job-skills training aligned with regional industry needs.

Hartnell College (NCES Locale—City: Midsize)

Hartnell College,¹⁶ in the city of Salinas, “serves the Salinas Valley, a fertile agricultural region some 10 miles wide and 100 miles long.” Its 2,300-square-mile service area includes predominantly rural and agricultural communities across Monterey County. The realities at the heart of Hartnell’s focus on equity and access include disparities in college-degree attainment, with rates falling below 10% in some of its rural areas. To increase outreach and access, Hartnell College has established various educational and outreach centers across its service area (in addition to its Salinas campus) that provide career technical education, dual enrollment within the high schools, distance education, and community-based services.



Across five campus locations, Hartnell College provides academic and career programs that align with regional and community needs and include agriculture, construction management, food safety, manufacturing technology, and welding. For example, through its High School Equivalency Program (HEP), Hartnell helps migrant and seasonal farmworkers earn their high school equivalency and move on to employment, military service, an apprenticeship, a Certificate of Skills Acquisition, a Certificate of Achievement, or an

associate degree. Hartnell is also working to expand credit for prior learning and develop competency-based education models that connect life experience to college credit, most of which will be offered in Spanish. The college recently celebrated the groundbreaking of a new facility in the city of Soledad that will house diesel technology training.

Hartnell has strong ties to the local community through formal partnerships with employers and donors, and maintains strong relationships with K-12 partners and four-year institutions, both in California's Central Coast region and in the Imperial Valley and Yuma, Arizona region, where many of its farmworker students migrate during the off-season. Students in agricultural programs are also able to gain experience, mentorship, and leadership through paid work-based learning opportunities. To further support workforce development, Hartnell College engages in regional partnerships that coordinate education and workforce efforts across the Salinas Valley and rural communities, including the Bright Futures Cradle to Career Education Partnership, the Salinas Valley Five Cities partnership, the Salinas Inclusive Economic Development Initiative, and Regions Rise Together: Salinas.

Shasta College (NCES Locale—Suburb: Midsize)

To reach students across its more than 10,000-square-mile service area, Shasta College¹⁷—the only public higher education institution within this area—operates campuses and education centers in multiple counties in addition to distance learning opportunities for students. Despite Shasta College's efforts to increase outreach and access, students in the region face ongoing challenges in accessing higher education, including limited access to the internet, incomes below the poverty level, and long travel distances that make it difficult to reach campus. To address some of these challenges as well as educator shortages in the region, Shasta College has partnered with the private Reach University to provide job-embedded bachelor's degree pathways for rural working adults, allowing them to stay in their local communities and earn a liberal studies degree while obtaining paid work experience.

To expand access to bachelor's degrees in a region with limited access to public baccalaureate-granting institutions, the college established the Bachelor's through Online and Local Degrees (BOLD) program, which supports students with transferring and pursuing a bachelor's degree online. These efforts are supported by the Shasta College Attainment and Innovation Lab for Equity, which focuses on developing place-based strategies to increase postsecondary access and attainment in rural communities through adult reentry pathways, credit for prior learning, flexible course formats, and "confronting race disparities and injustices in rural environments."

In addition to expanding access and flexible pathways, Shasta College supports rural students through dual enrollment and targeted workforce programs such as the dental hygiene program, which promotes careers in rural health care. The college also provides information to community-based supports for undocumented students, such as the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation and other organizations that offer immigration legal assistance, support with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) applications and renewals, and food and housing resources.



College Leaders' Perspectives on What It Means to Be Rural-Serving

To complement the institutional website analysis, I engaged in conversations with community college CEOs across California to hear their perspectives on what it means to be rural-serving despite not being federally recognized as rural. CEOs noted that current definitions of *rural* fail to capture the full reality of the communities they serve. One CEO said: "[The rural definition] doesn't ... look at our service area holistically, it just looks at our address. ... When we talk amongst colleges, we do specifically say rural-serving, so that it can encompass all of those dynamics and ... nuances of our service and identity."

As this CEO explained, a college located in a town that falls outside designated rural boundaries may still draw most of its students from rural communities and townships. Therefore, determining whether an institution is rural-serving should extend beyond its physical address to consider the populations it actually serves because recognizing and responding to the needs of students from rural communities is central to fulfilling the mission of a

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rural-serving community college. Yet some colleges fall outside the federal and national classifications commonly used to identify rural-serving colleges, with one CEO sharing that the way the state currently looks at rural colleges does not apply to institutions like theirs, despite “talk[ing] the language of the rural presidents in the state” and experiencing some of the same issues present in rural areas.

These definitional gaps also carry financial consequences. Being in a geographically isolated rural area, for example, drives up operational costs in ways that current funding formulas do not adequately reflect. As one CEO put it: “Our construction projects cost more because the workers are coming from farther away.” This also means that county services may not reach these colleges and their surrounding rural communities; as one CEO described: “Resources are strapped, the county services are strapped, and the college, we do the best we can ... to try and serve as many as we can. ... We always have to be prepared to just serve ourselves.” However, current *rural* definitions do not consider these realities, and colleges that serve rural communities without formal recognition are still expected to operate within funding structures that do not account for these conditions.

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What Rural Recognition Would Mean

Colleges that serve rural communities but are not formally recognized as rural-serving face immediate consequences in having limited access to funding because narrow rural classifications exclude many colleges from federal and state programs specifically designed to support rural communities. One CEO described being unable to apply for a federal student housing grant for rural colleges despite significant housing need among students, staff, and faculty: “We were going to apply for a grant to help us with student housing, but according to the federal definition, we were not eligible ... and so we couldn’t apply for that opportunity.”

Another CEO shared how intentionally framing their college as rural-serving opened the door to federal funding that would otherwise have been out of reach: “We called ourselves rural and described our community, the diversity of our community, and the outskirts of the communities that we know we were not reaching very well ... [We] actually characterized and described ourselves as rural-serving.” While this approach proved successful in this instance, the CEO was careful to note that it is not a reliable or universal solution given that there “might be some specific grants that require certain eligibility requirements that we would not fit” because of their lack of rural classification by federal and national standards. The absence of a formal rural designation also shapes whether leaders feel positioned to pursue funding; as one CEO shared: “I haven’t [applied for rural grants] because I knew we didn’t have the designation, so it isn’t something I’ve spent a lot of time on.”

The consequences of this gap extend beyond funding access, shaping the programs that colleges can participate in and their capacity to serve their communities. Rural-serving institutions often have fewer staff and faculty members across disciplines who provide direct support and expertise to student success efforts, yet for colleges without formal rural recognition, this constraint is rarely reflected in how programs are designed or what requirements colleges must meet. CEOs explained that without the economies of scale available to larger institutions, limited resources must stretch across multiple programs, roles, and often campus locations spread across large geographic areas. This limited institutional capacity is further compounded by program requirements that are designed without rural institutions in mind. One CEO noted: “[State-sponsored student programs may] require you to provide 50% matching grants [and] to put one faculty member on release time, and to have half a counselor assigned to just that program. I have [a few] counselors across my entire college, and they rotate across our ... [other campus locations located] an hour away ... [and] an hour and 45 minutes away, and we make that work. I can’t afford to lose this person, so am I going to bring [this state-sponsored student program] on anytime soon? No, because I can’t meet their ... kind of exorbitant demands.”

Because staff who provide direct support are critical to student success, statewide initiatives should account for the reality “that assigning release time to these subject-matter experts may have a disproportionate impact on rural institutions, where staffing capacity is limited and replacing subject expertise is often difficult.”

Yet these colleges are still expected to meet the same requirements as their larger, better-resourced counterparts. As one CEO described: “We just ... have to meet the same requirements as large districts with fewer resources. You often find individuals here [whose] title includes multiple programs. Because we ... essentially ... braid ... resources where possible.”

Despite the many challenges that rural-serving community colleges face, they are critical to the students and communities they serve. As one CEO shared: “We’re not just a college, we are the college for the community. So that means we carry such a huge responsibility to meet the students where they’re at.” This responsibility extends beyond the campus itself, with colleges often serving as community anchors in their immediate service area and the surrounding towns and remote areas. As CEOs described, these colleges are often the only local provider of higher education, workforce training, and basic needs support, stepping in when county services cannot reach isolated residents, partnering with community organizations when on-campus resources are out of reach, and developing creative workforce pipelines tailored to local economies and made up of small businesses and public sector employers. Far too often, though, that work goes unnoticed. One CEO reflected: “Oftentimes in a rural community college, you’re ... behind the scenes. You’re not the area of focus. You’re not going to be highlighted, but you’re doing the work. You may not be in the forefront, you may not be the college doing the most innovative thing, because you’re a smaller institution tucked away, but you’re doing some of the best work for your students and your community.”

Making that work visible and ensuring it is adequately supported require formal recognition that reflects not just where a college is located but also whom it serves and what role it plays in its community.

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Toward More Inclusive Definitions of Rural-Servingness

Current definitions of *rural* and approaches to defining rural-serving community colleges are too narrow to reflect current rural realities across the state. A significant number of colleges now classified as urban or suburban are in fact serving students in rural communities, and these underrecognized colleges often receive little targeted support for their work.

Meaningful support requires leaders at every level—including college trustees, the Board of Governors, the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, the California legislature and governor’s offices, and federal agencies—to invest in understanding the needs of local communities and to be open to innovative solutions to meet those needs. For example, one CEO shared that previous efforts to increase rural student access have included defaulting to expanding online courses as a solution, without accounting for students’ “family needs, their financial needs, their transportation needs, their needs for human connection and support. And then the sense of belonging.” To support rural-serving colleges more effectively, colleges and their leaders need to be included as partners in building solutions that address the challenges these communities face, which requires listening to what they actually need instead of assuming what they are missing.

In recent years, state policymakers have begun to recognize that educating students who are furthest from opportunity requires targeted investment and additional resources. As policymakers continue to refine funding-allocation formulas and consider special programs for rural colleges, it will be important to take a more expansive view of the needs of the many colleges serving students in rural communities. Yet as one CEO cautioned: “Just having a designation in and of itself doesn’t do anything if ... it doesn’t come with resources to actually support the population that is named by that designation.” Similarly, another CEO shared that even at the state level, where some colleges are acknowledged for their rural role, this recognition often does not come with “any additional ... funding streams or support.”

This brief suggests a reframing for how we think about rural-servingness in California and beyond. Moving forward, California needs a shared understanding of and commitment to rural-servingness that is context specific; grounded in service regions, student populations, institutional roles, and geographic and economic needs; and built in partnership with the multiple constituencies that have a stake in the success of these institutions. The recent formation of the California Rural-Serving Community College CEOs Caucus,¹⁸ driven by rural CEOs’ recognition that rural-serving colleges need a stronger collective voice in statewide policy conversations, reflects the commitment of leaders who have long been advocating for rural student access and equity. This also presents the state with an opportunity to consider the recognition, flexibility, funding, and policy investments that these colleges and communities deserve.

Current definitions of rural and approaches to defining rural-serving community colleges are too narrow to reflect current rural realities across the state.

Appendix

Appendix Table 1. NCES Classifications and Approximate Distance to Public 4-Year Institutions Among Identified Rural-Serving Community Colleges

Institution	NCES classification	Distance to nearest CSU (miles)	Distance to nearest UC (miles)
Allan Hancock College	City: Midsize	34	67
Bakersfield College	City: Large	10	111
Barstow Community College	Town: Distant	67	81
Butte College*	Rural: Distant	15	91
Cerro Coso Community College	Rural: Fringe	111	130
Clovis Community College	City: Large	7	63
Coalinga College	Town: Remote	67	100
College of the Redwoods*	Rural: Fringe	18	265
College of the Sequoias	City: Midsize	49	100
College of the Siskiyous*	Rural: Distant	140	221
Columbia College*	Rural: Fringe	55	58
Copper Mountain College	Rural: Distant	87	77
Crafton Hills College	Suburb: Large	21	21
Cuesta College	Rural: Fringe	6	103
Feather River College*	Rural: Remote	84	150
Fresno City College	City: Large	6	58
Gavilan College	Rural: Fringe	36	40
Hartnell College	City: Midsize	10	38
Imperial Valley College	Rural: Fringe	112	127
Lake Tahoe Community College	Rural: Fringe	99	119
Lassen College*	Town: Remote	104	204
Lemoore College	Rural: Fringe	39	91
Madera Community College	Rural: Fringe	22	42
Mendocino College*	Rural: Fringe	73	120
Merced College	City: Small	30	5
Modesto Junior College	City: Midsize	15	45
Monterey Peninsula College	Suburb: Midsize	8	45
Mt. San Jacinto College	Suburb: Midsize	41	27
Napa Valley College	City: Small	31	42
Oxnard College	City: Midsize	9	51
Palo Verde College	Rural: Distant	179	170
Porterville College	Suburb: Small	54	130
Reedley College	Town: Distant	30	82

Institution	NCES classification	Distance to nearest CSU (miles)	Distance to nearest UC (miles)
San Joaquin Delta College	Suburb: Large	48	57
Shasta College*	Suburb: Midsize	73	159
Taft College	Town: Distant	31	114
Ventura College	City: Midsize	18	42
Victor Valley College	Suburb: Large	34	49
Woodland Community College	Suburb: Small	25	12
Yuba College*	Suburb: Midsize	48	53

* Indicates a community college that is considered rural-serving by ARRC.

Note. Approximate distance to the nearest CSU or UC campus reflects the shortest driving distance in miles between the community college and the nearest main campus, based on Google Maps. Proximity alone does not indicate access because some nearby public 4-year institutions are highly selective and/or impacted in certain majors, meaning demand for specific majors exceeds available capacity and may not offer an accessible transfer pathway for many students in rural-serving regions. NCES classifications are provided for comparison purposes and do not fully capture the rural-serving roles described in this analysis.

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Endnotes

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There are various definitions of rural across national and federal policy contexts. For the purposes of this brief, federal definitions are those used by agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture to determine rural program and funding eligibility, while national definitions refer to classification systems that have been used for research and institutional comparisons, including the NCES locale classifications and the ARRC's rural-serving institution metric. Federal definitions rely primarily on population-based, county-level classifications, such as the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, which designate most California counties as metropolitan.

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Drawing on the concept of “servingness” at Hispanic-serving institutions and the work of rural scholars who have challenged narrow definitions of rurality and engaged directly with what *rural-serving* means, this brief views rural-servingness as an institution's functional and relational responsibility to the rural and/or agricultural communities it serves. This brief identifies how *rural-servingness* shows up in institutional practice based on institutional materials but not how it is experienced by the students and communities that colleges serve, an important direction for further research. For more, see Garcia, G. A., Núñez, A.-M., & Sansone, V. A. (2019). Toward a multidimensional conceptual framework for understanding “servingness” in Hispanic-serving institutions: A synthesis of the research. *Review of educational research*, 89(5), 745–784. doi.org/10.3102/0034654319864591; Korich, A. (2022). Crafting better rural-focused postsecondary policy by identifying rural-serving institutions. *The Rural Educator*, 43(4), 67–70. doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1374; Korich, A., Sansone, V. A., & Fryar, A. H. (2022). Rural-serving institutions aren't who you think they are. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 54(3), 28–33. doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2022.2054181; McNamee, T. C., & Ardoin, S. (2025). The critical role of rural-located institutions and rural-serving institutions in fostering rural student postsecondary success. In S. Hu & J. O'Shea (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook on postsecondary student success* (pp. 307–322). Routledge; Nuñez Martinez, M. (2023). Bakersfield rural initiatives: Serving rural communities of color in the San Joaquin Valley. In T. Hallmark, S. Ardoin, & D. R. Means (Eds.), *Race and rurality* (pp. 147–152). Routledge; Puente, M., et al. (2023). Rural Latinx students' spatial imaginations of their college choices: Toward a student understanding of “rural-serving institutions” in California's San Joaquin Valley. *Education Sciences*, 13(7), 660. doi.org/10.3390/educsci13070660

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wheelhouse-mail-list](mailto:education.ucdavis.edu/wheelhouse-mail-list)

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