

A HEART FOR RURAL AMERICA

By Karen Doss Bowman

How Higher Education
Supports America's
Smaller Communities



Amanda Courtois, a senior at Eastern Oregon University (EOU) based in La Grande, Ore., is passionate about wide open spaces. Hailing from small, rural Weiser, Idaho, Courtois loves being outdoors and taking advantage of the natural resources near her home. She readily shares that enthusiasm with others, but she's also eager to learn what life is like for city dwellers.

In September, Courtois participated in the Urban-Rural Ambassadors Institute, a collaborative between EOU and Portland State University (PSU) designed to break down the barriers between rural and urban communities to help students discover common ground. The six-credit-hour course is focused on the principles and methods of collaboration that could provide a foundation for finding creative solutions to the challenges facing vastly different regions within the state.

During the 10-day program, the small group of students from both campuses spent a week together at EOU studying rural issues—such as land use, water rights and farming—and

a week at PSU learning about urban concerns such as housing, homelessness and poverty. To help students develop a greater understanding of both regions, the program included classroom discussions, meetings with local leaders and field trips to sites of historical or cultural value in both Portland and La Grande.

“I wanted to gain the experience of working with people different from me, and to learn how they think of rural America and gain some insights from their perspectives,” says Courtois, an ecological biology major with minors in natural resources and communications. “I’m very passionate about natural resources, so it was

exciting for me to share my experience and love for agriculture and the land with students who haven’t really grown up [thinking about] these issues. It was amazing to be able to talk about issues [that affect me] every day, that the Portland students didn’t understand, and vice versa. I’m so willing to learn about other people’s perspectives and experiences, so it was very interesting.”

Like EOU, rural colleges and universities across the United States have a critical role to play in today’s higher education landscape. These institutions, many of them AASCU schools, have long-established reputations for serving their communities—both in terms of educating students from the surrounding regions and by enhancing opportunities for economic growth and development.

The Urban-Rural Ambassador Institute is one of EOU’s earliest initiatives since being designated as “Oregon’s Rural University” by the state legislature and Gov. Kate Brown. The program emerged out of EOU’s Rural Engagement and Vitality (REV) Center, which strives to transform “challenges into opportunities through applied research, public policy analysis, community education and outreach programs,” according to the REV website. The Center is focused on areas such as workforce development, community resiliency, sustainability, rural policies and public engagement.

“We are embracing our place and leveraging our unique characteristics to serve our students and the rural communities in Eastern Oregon,” says EOU President Tom Insko, an alumnus of the university who grew up on a family farm in the region. “Being rural is an asset that can be used to benefit our students by giving them high-impact, experiential learning opportunities to engage in meaningful ways with community businesses and nonprofits. Being more closely connected to our communities allows us to offer high-impact educational opportunities that tie back in meaningful ways to our mission.”

Facing Multiple Hurdles

Many AASCU schools were founded over a century ago to prepare teachers to serve the rural communities surrounding them. Though these public colleges and universities have expanded their missions to embrace a full array of academic programs—from teacher education and health care professions to business, engineering and technology—they still maintain their historic commitment to serving the geographic regions where they are located.

“One of the unique aspects of a regional institution like ours is the connectedness we have to our community,” says Lynette Olson, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Pittsburg State University in Kansas. “At Pittsburg State, we have woven that connectedness into our university’s mission statement, so we aim to provide a transformational experience for our students and our community. It is really a focal point for all AASCU institutions.”

More than 70 percent of the United States is rural, according to research by East Carolina University’s (ECU) Rural Prosperity Initiative. And yet youth from these areas often face multiple barriers to pursuing a college education. A significant number live in poverty and face food insecurity; many would be the first in their families to go to college, so they don’t have an adult in their lives to guide them through the application process and beyond; and many have to get jobs—often on a family farm or ranch or in a family business—to help financially support their families. Additionally, a majority of these communities have seen a mass exodus of the manufacturing jobs that once sustained their economies.

According to “The Rural Higher-Education Crisis,” a September 2017 article in *The Atlantic*, “The high school graduates who head off to campus in the lowest proportions in America are the ones from rural places.” And data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) shows that the percentage of adults from rural areas with a bachelor’s degree or higher—among those



aged 25 and older—still lags behind the same population in urban areas (19 percent compared to 33 percent in 2016). The USDA study also notes, however, that “in both urban and rural areas, education is associated with higher earnings.”

For rural communities, another challenge is “brain drain”—when the young people who go away for college don’t return to establish careers and raise families. Instead, they flock to urban or suburban areas for the prospect of diverse job opportunities and higher salaries.

“Often the best and brightest don’t come back,” says Charles Snare, vice president of academic affairs at Chadron State College in Nebraska. “That ends up being a huge challenge,” impacting the local economy and recruitment of students and faculty.

Most colleges and universities are concerned about enrollment, especially in light of declining numbers of high school graduates in many regions. But rural institutions face an added barrier when competing for students from urban or suburban areas who may perceive these regions as lacking in convenience, culture, entertainment and opportunity. This sometimes calls for creative solutions.

At Northern Michigan University, for example, a nearly 20 percent drop in enrollment over a four-year period caused administrators to look for new ways to appeal to prospective students, according to a report by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Their tactics included adding two unusual academic programs: a medicinal plant chemistry degree program focused on marijuana and a forensic anthropology major featuring the world’s first cold-weather body farm. These programs, along with other strategic initiatives, no doubt have contributed to a boost in the university’s enrollment over the past two years.

Recruiting faculty and staff is another challenge facing rural institutions. It can be difficult, for example, to attract minorities to rural communities where they might feel out

of place—or even unwelcome. Younger faculty may be looking for a more upscale, fashionable atmosphere. And even those who would be interested in teaching at a rural college or university may be concerned about job prospects for spouses or partners.

“It is challenging to recruit young professional faculty and staff members who haven’t yet established themselves or their families,” Olson says. “Oftentimes they want a more vibrant community, and our community is limited in what it can offer.”

Pittsburg State has partnered with the City of Pittsburg to revitalize the historic downtown in hopes of creating an atmosphere that will appeal to prospective students and young professionals. One of their projects, Block22, is a distinct living-learning community with 100 apartment units for students, co-working facilities and over 16,000 square feet of business incubator space for students to pursue entrepreneurial ventures. The downtown improvements also include new restaurants and businesses, improved lighting and sidewalks, and other infrastructure upgrades.

“It gives the community a different vibe than it had in the recent past,” Olson says. “We have had a good number of young families coming back to Pittsburg who find that it fits their lives, but it’s still a challenge to recruit. [Young professionals] often may not comprehend what a rural lifestyle feels like and what you can make of it.”

Teaching Students, Building Stronger Communities

ECU, located in Greenville, N.C., finds the circumstances of its region a sharp contrast from the state’s prosperous urban centers of Charlotte, Raleigh/Durham and Winston-Salem. A significant number of ECU’s students (nearly 11,000 out of a student body of 29,000) come from the Tier 1 and Tier 2 counties—the poorest counties in the state—that surround the university.

“We’re in a beautiful part of the state that happens to have many communities with great disparities related to health care, education and the economy,” says ECU Chancellor Cecil Staton. “We view our mission as trying to find a way to help this unique area within our state as we try to address these disparities.”

ECU launched the Rural Prosperity Initiative (RPI) to address the problems facing eastern North Carolina and other rural communities. A multi-faceted effort, RPI pulls together resources throughout the university community and forms partnerships with government, business and nonprofit organizations “to improve the quality of life, health, education and employment” for residents in the surrounding communities. Global tech leader SAS, based in Cary, N.C., is supporting RPI research and programs through analytics and data visualization.

As a leader in teacher education—placing more teachers in North Carolina public schools than any other institution in the state—ECU is uniquely poised to address educational disparities. For example, the university has teamed up with Pitt County Public Schools to create a laboratory school. Serving second through fourth grades, it provides a hands-on training site for future teachers and administrators. The university also established the Innovation Early College High School on campus for students who are first-generation college applicants, at risk for dropping out, or seeking accelerated learning opportunities, allowing them to earn college credit while getting a personalized education.

“This helps prepare high school students to think about and dream of getting a college education,” Staton says.

Eastern North Carolina also faces higher-than-average rates of chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes. ECU is set to launch a College of Rural Public Health in 2021, capitalizing on the strengths of the ECU Brody School of Medicine—the number one provider

of physicians working in rural and underserved areas of North Carolina—to improve access to care and education about prevention of disease. The program will also provide students with valuable real-world learning experiences and opportunities to interact with patients.

“We are committed to becoming a national model for how a university can move the needle relative to health care disparities, educational disparities and economic disparities,” says Staton, pointing out that ECU is also home to the state’s largest business school. “We are committed to bringing the resources of our university [and our partners] to address these incredible problems and challenges. We believe we can do more to help.”

Rural institutions also play a critical role in economic development and workforce preparation. For example, the College of Technology at Pittsburg State offers strong programs in automotive technology, construction, workforce training and vocational teacher training—programs that emphasize emerging careers and must-have skills for success in the 21st century.

“We’re helping to provide that next generation of workers in a variety of industries,” Olson says. “We’re committed to our region and to supporting the economy. It’s important to create an environment of innovation around teaching, innovation in health care and innovation in other areas. That allows our students to explore and develop new opportunities and interests for themselves.”

Embracing Your Place

A number of years ago, AASCU began emphasizing the concept of “stewardship of place”—a notion that public higher

education’s engagement and relationship with the communities and people they serve is critical to everyone’s success. When an institution can embrace its place, academic programs and extracurricular activities tie into the rich opportunities and resources these areas have to offer.

EOU, for example, annually hosts the Cottonwood Crossing Summer Institute, a residential field studies program for high school students to learn about “locally significant cultural or natural resources.” During the two-week program, participants study the region’s ecology; work in teams to develop renewable energy solutions to real-world problems; conduct field research; and use creative media such as video, photography or writing to develop projects.

“By embracing where we are, it illustrates for students the opportunities that we have in rural areas,” Insko says. “The results of these kinds of efforts, involving research and practical experience, are thriving students and thriving communities.”

The landscape surrounding EOU has also inspired a community health initiative. In response to research indicating that leisure-time physical activity can reduce the risk of cancer, EOU professor Kelly Rice started Go-ASAP—the Get Outside After School Activity Program. Supported by more than \$75,000 in grant funding, the program provides outdoor after-school activities for middle schoolers, such as hiking, snowshoeing, backpacking and biking. Students will hopefully gain a stronger appreciation for the beauty of the place they live while

boosting their physical, social and mental well-being.

“Dr. Rice is recognizing the opportunities to leverage our beautiful surroundings to address community health,” Insko says. “If we embrace the landscape around us and recognize the opportunities around us to be active and engaged with our environment, we can connect the dots to show kids how they can lead a healthy lifestyle. And this program also engages EOU students in the research and in leading the activities, so they also are learning how a rural environment offers a different avenue to wellness.”

Rural colleges and universities offer much value to the regions they serve. By embracing innovation and excellence, they can leverage the unique resources, cultures and strengths of their communities to fuel prosperity for all.

“As rural institutions, we have to address the underdog mentality of our communities,” Insko says. “We need to help the general public understand the huge role rural institutions play in helping our communities to not just survive, but to thrive by providing access to education for our young people and good jobs for economic growth.” **P**

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