

# At Issue: survival tactics for small, rural-serving community colleges

**Clyde “Jud”  
Hicks**

**Stephanie J.  
Jones**

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*Dr. Jud Hicks is the president of Frank Phillips College in Borger, Texas.*

*Dr. Stephanie J. Jones is an assistant professor of higher education at Texas Tech University, in Lubbock.*

*Currently, a majority of two-year colleges in the United States are located in rural areas. Small, rural-serving community colleges are instrumental to the survival of the communities they reside in, as well as vital to the stakeholders they serve. How does being a rural community college present specialized challenges and in what ways do the characteristics of these small, rural colleges help foster their reputation as successful institutions? To gain some insight into these matters, the presidents from three of these colleges sat down with the authors to discuss the challenges their institutions face. Additionally, they offer practical and insightful solutions to these challenges.*

## Introduction

Community colleges serve as the primary source of postsecondary education for large segments of underserved student populations. With little regard for their geographic settings or the nature of resources available to the institution, community colleges are expected to provide a comprehensive educational experience and serve the larger community within which it resides. Indeed, it is important to note that the majority of two-year colleges service rural constituents (Smith 2009). For these community colleges, providing comprehensive services and programs to small, rural, relatively isolated regions, can be a substantial challenge. Nonetheless, “Rural community colleges have been viewed by residents, state legislators, and policy makers, as catalysts for sustaining

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high-quality of life opportunities for rural America” and, in many cases, are chief contributors to the economic livelihood of their communities (Miller & Tuttle, 2007, p. 4). These institutions are vital to their constituents, providing opportunities “to access services and educational programs designed to help secure their future success” (Smith, 2009, p. 1). More broadly, it has been argued that, “The community college represents an ideal catalyst for addressing many of the problems of rural life whose solutions may lie in the education and development of people” (Vineyard, 1979, p. 34).

Despite their central role in the life of their communities, small, rural-serving community colleges are faced with continual challenges and conditions that threaten their existence. Chief among these challenges are: shrinking student population bases, the inability to attract and retain credentialed faculty and staff, inadequate state funding, lower property tax values resulting in lower tax revenues, and an inability to maintain technology demands necessary for the 21st century (Eller et al., 2003; Killackey & Valadez, 1995; Pennington et al., 2006; Valek, 1995). These issues are magnified for rural-serving institutions due to their declining populations and state funding, as well as limited access to qualified personnel.

To highlight the factors that impact the continued existence and performance of rural-serving community colleges and their abilities to serve students, as well as their communities, the presidents of three successful small, rural-serving colleges agreed to discuss the challenges their particular institutions face. Additionally, they pointed to the internal characteristics possessed by their institutions that enable them to overcome these challenges.

## **Institutional Selection and Profiles**

These presidents represent successful schools located in the Southeast, Southwest, and Midwest. With unduplicated enrollments between 500 and 1,999 students, these institutions are small (Carnegie Foundation, 2010) and nonunionized. As the reader will note in the profiles below, the surrounding communities are also small and rural.

These colleges are not nationally recognized for a singular program of excellence or find themselves situated in some communities who harbor specialized resources or characteristics, which result in abnormal levels of community support for the college. In short, they are fairly typical of small, rural community colleges. Due to the sensitive nature of this

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discussion, pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the presidents and institutions.

### **“Scenic Community College”**

Shane has been the president of Scenic Community College since 1996. Scenic Community College is located in a rural town with a population of 5,500. The college is located on a major interstate highway, and the community in which it resides is located approximately two hours from two metropolitan areas in either direction. Founded in 1979, the college currently has an enrollment of approximately 944 students. Although it has a limited collegiate sports program and is without any residential housing, the college does have a full range of technical and academic offerings. Financial strains, 15 years ago, placed the school in jeopardy of being closed. To address the problem, the school transitioned from a technical training college to a comprehensive community college. This move has helped to stabilize the institution.

### **“Green Lake Community College”**

David is the president of Green Lake Community College, a small, rural comprehensive college with a student population of 1,354. The college, founded in 1975, is

located in the center of a major, regional recreational area and is the benefactor of a steady flow of tourism. It does not have residential housing and does not participate in collegiate sports. The college was founded as a technical college and began to make the transition to a comprehensive college, offering courses for college credit transfer under contract with other state colleges and universities in the early 1990s. In the mid-90s the college became a fully accredited college. It has two other campuses, in addition to its main campus.

### **“Heartland Community College”**

Scott is the president of Heartland Community College, which is located in a community with a population of 11,000. The community is situated in a town halfway between two major cities, both being approximately a two-hour drive. The town is known as a manufacturing and agriculture community. The college was founded in 1923 and has an enrollment of approximately 1,948 students. The college has a tradition-rich history of offering academic transfer classes in addition to numerous technical and certification programs. Somewhat unique to small, rural-serving community colleges, the college has an extensive theatre program.

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## **Challenges of Rural-Serving Community Colleges**

Through their dialogue, the presidents identified several key challenges they face at their respective institutions. These challenges include: the effective utilization of resources, decreased state funding and depressed tax bases, slim margins for error, meeting the needs of diverse student populations, and the recruitment and retention of quality employees.

### **Utilizing Resources Effectively**

The presidents proclaimed their institutions to be masters at “doing more with less.” Small enrollments coupled with rural settings mean that they have limited resources and equally limited staff to bring to bear to meet their institutional objectives. New programs and services must demonstrate their viability from a cost/benefit analysis. The presidents are very cognizant that their small size means they do not have the size needed to achieve any sort of critical mass or realize the advantage of economies of scale at their colleges.

The presidents expressed the value they placed in, and their heavy dependence on, the faculty, staff, and administration to do their jobs. In addition to being re-

quired to do more with less, a typical employee “wears many hats.” Shane, president of Scenic Community College, emphasized the importance of having “all hands on deck” at all times and the commitment of employees at his institution to serve students:

...we have to meet the same standards and same reporting requirements. We do it, but I always say the people that work ... in a rural community college, unbeknownst to most people and even to my colleagues who have no comprehension, they do a Herculean effort to serve the needs of the rural.

Because most departments at these institutions are understaffed, job responsibilities cover a broad span. Employees develop a responsive attitude to the situation, understanding that students must be taken care of and everyone in the college is responsible for doing so. Through the narratives of the presidents, evidence emerged indicating that these institutions discovered how to harness the responsive attitudes of faculty, staff, and administrators. In essence, the responsive attitudes of employees have spawned an eagerness of doing more than what is in the job description and in addition, goes beyond any self-imposed or perceived boundary that would likely occur in other environ-

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ments. The authors perceive this to be due to the student-centered focus of these institutions, as well as simply not having large numbers of support staff that would be commonly seen in larger institutions. The presidents expressed a willingness on the part of employees to extend themselves beyond what those of larger institutions would do. We conclude that the employees at these institutions support the student-focused mission of their colleges, and helping students succeed motivates the employees to do more. This willingness or motivation to help is supported by Herzberg's two-factor theory, which states that "people experience a 'high' or 'pleasure' from a satisfying experience" (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 292). The viewpoint expressed by these individuals was validated by their previous work experience and firsthand knowledge at larger institutions. Scott, president of Heartland Community College, stated that, "it's almost family-like." David, president of Green Lake Community College, added, "I think as you develop a culture of people who like what they are doing, then they individually, whatever their job is, they are going to be high performing. If everyone is working in a high performing method, it is just obvious."

Rural areas of the U.S. have, for the most part, declining popu-

lations (Stauber, 2007). Because of these declining populations rural community colleges have difficulty in finding and retaining faculty, staff, and administrators from the local areas. As the presidents commented, employees of these rural colleges must provide multiple services to the colleges and their students. Employees are truly a "family unit." They must support and assist one another. All employees (including clerical staff) learn to represent the institution, at all times. All employees recruit, work with, and assist students. Students are extensions of the family unit. The *esprit de corps* of the college is if a student fails or withdraws, it is a loss to the family unit. The concept of *community* in these colleges is important and actually integrated into the culture and environment.

### **Funding and Tax Base**

Funding was cited as a major challenge by the presidents. This was not surprising and has repeatedly been cited in previous research (Katsinas, Alexander, and Opp, 2003; Katsinas & Tollefson, 2009; Killacky & Valadez, 1995; Reichard, 1995). Unfortunately, the expected funding shortfalls are projected to continue well into the future. Enrollment is a major component in virtually most state funding formulas. The three colleges of focus in this discussion

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are allocated state appropriations as individual institutions versus through a state system. The largest percentage of funding for Scenic and Green Lake Community colleges is from state funding. Heartland Community College's main funding is from the local tax base, with its second highest funding source being the state. Understandably, small, rural colleges struggle more so than their urban and suburban counterparts, and will continue to do so. By definition, state funding supports enrollment growth, yet the geographical locations these institutions are located in are where much of the population is moving out of to metropolitan areas. Less population means fewer individuals purchasing homes and other property, decreasing the funding generated from the local tax base. Enrollment growth, therefore, increased funding, has not and potentially will not, occur.

The consensus of the presidents was that funding will continue to be an issue for all community colleges, but specifically the institutions that are small and in rural areas. Lack of funding has become a part of the daily challenges and they have grown accustomed to it. Shane (Scenic Community College) stated, "I think the biggest challenge ... well, it continues to be where are you going to get the funding to run the small,

rural colleges? You know, there are only so many people in these small, rural communities, and it's dwindling every day." David added, "The challenge is not falling through the cracks, not allowing yourself to fall through the cracks. As you look at the legislative scenarios and the funding scenarios, we have to be careful. We have to convince people of our value, or we will fall through those cracks ..."

Additionally, rural-serving institutions do not generally have the tax base to receive more funding via property tax revenues without levying additional taxes by increasing the local tax rate. Even in states where community colleges have taxing authority to levy taxes for either operations or facilities, the small, rural institutions are at a deficit. Shane emphasized this further:

You basically have no tax base in a rural area. I actually have more cattle than human beings. So one of the big challenges and the uniqueness of a rural community college is you have to be able to meet the needs of the community on a shoestring budget. And so that takes a real entrepreneurial spirit, innovations, and constantly watch[ing] the horizon for opportunities.

And by every stretch, this college wouldn't be here today based on new and emerging

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criteria of what would warrant having a college in your community. So this isn't the 60s and 70s... you better have got on then, because it's not happening anymore. So, yeah, they wouldn't put it here today. And to keep one here is tough. But that's the challenge.

Funding is affected by static or decreasing enrollments. As with many state-supported community colleges, enrollment is closely tied to the amount of state funding received, due to it being based on full-time student enrollments. The debate continues on the fairness or equity of funding based on enrollment and about whether special consideration should be given to small colleges in rural areas because of their unique situations (Katsinas & Tollefson, 2009). The fact remains that the presidents of these colleges are focused on enrollment numbers and the impact on their institutions.

Shane (Scenic Community College) addressed two points of impact. One was related to job security, "... I'm not quite sure that they [faculty and staff] always understand the relationship between enrollment and job security," and the second related to revenue, "It's all enrollment driven... You've got to have bodies in order to generate tuition... that's a part of the revenue stream..." Enrollment comes from the population cen-

ters, and many rural communities have declining populations.

### **Margin for Error**

The presidents addressed the critical issue of "making the right decisions" as the "margin for error" is ever so slight for the small, rural institution. To be able to truly understand the environment, it is imperative to understand this concept. Small, rural colleges have limited funding and, by most accounts, they are severely underfunded; they have serious personnel access deficiencies, in addition to encountering difficulties in hiring and retaining faculty, staff, and administrators; they face relentless pressures to introduce the latest innovative programs; they live in an environment where enrollment demands are constantly hovering like a dark cloud; they are tasked with breathing life into the local community; they require "above and beyond" leadership responsibilities from their institutional leaders. Under these circumstances, the margin for error is critically thin. A mistake, a missed calculation, a change in variables can be harmful or even detrimental to the college. This is evidenced through Shane's (Scenic Community College) comments:

The margin for error in a small, rural community college is much... What would

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you tell all of these people, the margin for error here is so narrow. We could close this college in a heartbeat as opposed to your margin of error in a large [college]... If you... lose 250 students, in [large city] or over in [another large city], oh, well, you know, there's always next semester. If you lose 250 students here [by making a mistake]... you're going to be letting people go. So the margin for error... you can't afford to make mistakes because you're dealing with the lives of your staff. So that's probably the thing that bothers me the most... that we can't make many mistakes and still be here... These colleges are walking a tightrope.

This is true for the colleges' human resources as well, from the president to staff, faculty, and administration. Shane continued:

This—the role that I have here is a presidential job as opposed to a presidency position. You actually have to know how a community college runs from the bottom up and from the top down and inside out. Everybody here that works for me—we're probably one deep, so when we talk about multitasking, that's not a— that's not a figment of our imagination. That's everyday life.

To combat the margin for error issue, the colleges often adopt

extreme strategic planning and data-driven decision-making models. David discussed Green Lake Community College's planning processes:

In our planning process and our strategic planning... we ask ourselves hard questions and therefore you are able to identify the challenges. I am big on that, you know what they are. If we are aware of them, what are the challenges that we think we face right now and what we think we are going to face in three years... We are an industry of catchphrases and one of those catchphrases is strategic planning, long range planning, and looking to the future. Well, we take it beyond phrases and say "let's do it." We are really going to look at the challenges that present themselves to us.

In addition to strategic planning, data-driven decision making is a part of everyday life at the colleges. This was further supported by Shane and David. Shane emphasized that Scenic Community College did not make decisions without supporting data: "I've got to have the data to support making the decisions because I can't just shoot from the hip because I don't have the resources." David continued to support the importance of planning and data-driven decision making by confirming



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the same occurs at Green Lake Community College:

We don't just plan, but we follow up on things, and we follow through with things. I think that's become evident, that's a culture that occurs if you stay consistently after... that you know we need to be a planning institution. We are very much an institution that gets into assessment... To me, assessment is you say we are going to do something, you evaluate it, and then you see how to use those results to improve something... We develop a culture here of continually improving ourselves.

### **Meeting the Needs of Students**

The presidents spoke of offering programs, providing adequate facilities, using updated technology, serving their communities, increasing enrollments, and numerous other critical components, all within the context of being passionate about serving students and providing them the best opportunities for success. The primary driving force behind institutional efforts was a *passionate compassion* for meeting the needs of all students across each campus.

When discussing the challenges of meeting the needs of students, Shane (Scenic Community College) stated, "If only three stu-

dents showed up... an event would be considered a success." He went on to provide an example of serving small school districts:

...we went out and serviced very tiny school districts, three students here, four students there. We gave the customer service that these superintendents were looking for: that we actually cared about their three students. The bigger colleges just kind of blew it off.

David expressed his attitude toward students in this manner:

If you keep saying that's why we come to work every day and your job is to provide help, provide life-changing opportunities, you will develop a culture of cohesiveness. You develop a culture of people knowing why they are even here. I mean, we all work for a paycheck—I mean, I work for a paycheck—but it's nice to know that your paycheck is a cause because you are helping someone with a life-changing opportunity.

State legislators, higher education experts, and interested bystanders have and will continue to evaluate higher education on the merits of financial stability and enrollment numbers, as well as retention and completion rates. However, the presidents recognized that the core of their institutions was to be student-centered

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colleges. The relatively small population base from which they draw requires that each student who attends see the college as a *family* unit, supporting the concept of *in loco parentis*.

### **Recruitment and Retention of Employees**

The recruitment and retention of quality staff and faculty is another challenge faced by most community colleges, but it is acute for those located in rural areas. Oftentimes, the most visible competition for the limited supply of qualified and competent human resources comes from the local public school districts in these small communities. Both educational organizations (state-supported) are vying for individuals from the same resource pool. This phenomenon occurs in both the hiring and retention of employees. Two of the institutions, Scenic Community College and Heartland Community College, do have the option of going beyond the local employee pool into the larger metropolitan areas that surround them. However, going outside the local pool often resulted in higher than normal salary expectations. As Scott (Heartland Community College) stated when referring to average salaries of a nearby larger institution, “Our faculty salaries are mid-\$40s, their faculty salaries are mid-\$70s. Our administrative

salaries are mid-\$60s, theirs are over a \$100.”

The presidents indicated that there were not that many applicants for vacant positions. There needed to be careful and considerate contemplation on faculty hires. Additionally, those who did work at the institutions were deemed to be a valuable asset who needed to be retained and rewarded. The presidents went on to say that their employees, especially faculty, served in *many roles*. Because these community colleges are limited in the number of *support* employees (admissions staff, financial aid, secretarial, and so forth) they can afford to hire, these individuals are required to take on some of the duties that, for larger community colleges, would be administered by professional employees. David (Green Lake Community College) discussed this in the context of interviewing potential employees, “I tell people ... if you’re coming here for a job, I would prefer that you look somewhere else. This is a profession ... this isn’t some pass-through job... . My job is to convince them that they’re changing human lives and this is a calling.”

### **Discussion**

The college presidents who participated in this conversation have been able to position their insti-

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tutions so as to capitalize on the characteristics of their colleges and have found ways to develop successful reputations. Their narratives highlight the main challenges that these institutions face, including the two main concerns of all colleges today: efficient utilization of scarce resources and funding. In addition to these areas, other challenges were identified, including (a) a low margin for error, (b) meeting the needs of students, (c) recruitment and retention of qualified faculty and staff, (d) a declining student population due to the migration of rural America to the metropolitan areas, and (e) a decreasing population of traditional-age college students.

Katsinas et al. (2003) found that rural colleges experience the same challenges as most state-funded higher education institutions, but are faced with additional barriers due to limited budgets and the nature of their rural service areas. They have higher operating costs per student (Katsinas et al., 2003). Members of the communities that the colleges serve look to them as economic developers. State funding will continue to be an issue for all higher education institutions, but more specifically for small, rural-serving community colleges. Some of the key concerns addressed by Katsinas et al. (2003) are that rural-serving institutions, as with all state-supported institu-

tions, have faced a decline in state funding since 1980, have seen tuition and fees rise to compensate for the shortfalls in funding by the state, receive state funding based on traditional funding formulas that do not support the comprehensive missions of colleges, and their unique needs are not addressed through state-funding mechanisms. The use of full-time equivalencies to fund colleges may be a disservice to those institutions whose missions are to serve its rural community and service area. According to the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, in 2008, 46% of college students were classified as part time (2011). Oftentimes, students enrolled in community colleges work and take care of their family, which does not allow them to enroll in college as full-time students. In addition, an increase in state support for higher education generated through additional taxes does not appear to be a part of the future.

### **Functional Precision and Attitudinal Disposition**

The abilities of these high-performing, small, rural-serving community colleges to address the challenges identified to their advantage have two components: a functional aspect and a behavioral aspect. The functional aspect is what we have termed as *functional*

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*precision.* Functional precision relates to the ability to assess the situation, make decisions, achieve a level of work ethic, set goals, and plan strategically. These colleges are mission driven. The functional aspects became apparent during the interviews.

In regard to the behavioral aspect, we use the term *attitudinal disposition* to describe these institutions. The cultures of the colleges, through their leadership, display a quiet demeanor of steadfastness and a disposition of being plain-spoken and deliberate in their approach, one of resolve tempered with compassion. To illustrate this point, the following phrases were extracted from the presidents' discussions:

- “You have to watch for opportunities...”
- “I want to roll up my sleeves and manage the institution...”
- “They are very, very customer-oriented here...”
- “People are expected to perform...”
- “The institution has a great amount of expectations...”
- “We can’t keep doing the same old thing...”
- “I do believe we are lean...”
- “We face challenges head-on...”
- “You have to be aggressive and competitive...”

- “Willing to make those changes to make things even better...”

The colleges have a culture that enables them to make decisions quickly to resolve the challenges they encounter. This tactic applies whether it is an operational-type issue or it involves human resources, starting up or evaluating program offerings, seeking outside resources, or simply helping students achieve success. The ability to identify the situation, the functional precision to execute it, and the attitudinal disposition to do something about it typifies these colleges. It seems the presidents understand that survival and achieving high performance depends upon these concepts working in unison. The indication is that identification of the issue or situation that involves an action and the ability to identify a course of action is not necessarily the most difficult component—carrying out the action becomes the challenge that other institutions possibly tend to shy away from. This appears not to be the case with these institutions. The attitudinal disposition to follow through is a key factor of their success.

If functional precision and attitudinal disposition are the components that make these institutions successful, then the fuel for running this engine is the passion and compassion they have for

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students. Being student friendly is often used as a cliché in many places of higher learning. However, because the institutions are so small and exist in rural settings, this concept is demonstrated through the actions of the faculty, staff, and administration who go *above and beyond* to serve the needs of their students. In observing and analyzing the concept of student friendliness, several ideas emerged from the interviews. The most prevalent idea was why these colleges operate in this manner: The students are truly valued as a scarce commodity. It is not hard for faculty, staff, and administration to realize the significance of the student—the direct correlation between the existence of the institution and the student are quite evident. It is much easier to value what is scarce and the contrary is true, as well. A second idea regarding student friendliness: It is easier to be student friendly when you have fewer students. The faculty, staff, and administration of successful colleges make student friendliness a staple of their diet, and anonymity for the student is difficult to achieve on the campuses of these colleges.

### **Presidential Leadership**

It cannot be assumed that because these colleges are small and located in rural settings that the quality of their leadership is lacking.

Quite the contrary—leadership at these institutions appears to be quite competent. It is evident that these leaders walk to the *beat of their own drum* and relish the playground of their environments. They are highly engaged in the operations of their colleges through their leadership and oversight roles. The leadership and influences that they exert on their respective colleges is a recognizable internal characteristic that earns them the reputation of leading high-performing colleges. The influence of these presidents on the success of their institutions appears to be significant.

The presidents recognized that their institutions had to be in the forefront of their rural service areas. To paraphrase the responses of Shane (Scenic Community College) and David (Green Lake Community College), their colleges have to be “opportunistic, have an entrepreneurial spirit, and [be] innovative to keep the doors open, show incremental improvement, rise above the rest, and be willing to change.” In many instances, they have to be proactive in helping to create a demand for their services by aggressively recruiting students. The presidents talked about not waiting for the students to come, but going out and servicing the students where they were at. In most cases, they realize their institutions cannot operate as *sta-*

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*tus quo* nor can they afford to do things as other types of higher education institutions do.

The presidents make a clear and concerted effort to establish a climate of transparency in their administrative styles and manners. As David (Green Lake Community College) stated:

We are always communicating to our institution, constituents, our external constituents, our colleagues, and we are trying to be very open about what we are doing at this institution... I believe in transparency, I am an open book. We are going to say we are going to do these things, then we are going to do it, and then we are going to let everybody know how it's going, and then there are not any secrets about what we are up to.

When the presidents discussed their collegiate environments, they looked broadly, including not only their institutions, but also the local communities and beyond. The campus climates and cultures are cultivated in an open and transparent way. The organizational hierarchies at these institutions are relatively flat. Generally, not any one employee of the college is more than four or five positions away from the president. The size of the institutions afforded the presidents opportunities to be more accessible and allowed

them to converse with employees and walk around the campus on “fact-finding” excursions. Presidents who are seen around campus and who are engaged in the day-to-day activities of their institutions have a better pulse of the culture and climate of their colleges and are more approachable and informed of issues occurring. This creates a more proactive approach to operating the institutions, as presidents are able to get information as problems are developing and not only when the issue has escalated through the system. Everyday life at the colleges for all employees is an exposed and open environment that stimulates a climate and culture that is much the same.

According to the presidents, their small and rural colleges have the ability to be flexible, to change directions, and to be responsive as organizations. These elements were cited as key advantages to being a small and rural college. Effective and succinct communications become a means to the end and is one of the most important underpinnings of successful institutions. It seems to set the tone for the colleges, it gives meaning to the campus demeanor, and it is a precursor as to how the institutions go about performing their missions. According to the presidents, their small and rural colleges have the ability to be flexible, to change

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directions, and to be responsive as an organization. They must be; the vitality of their institutions depend on it.

The presidents indicated that, in their view, transparency was a strength of their institutions. All stakeholders who will be affected are part of the decision-making process. However, there is a downside. Because these are small institutions, there may be a lack of diversity of opinions and ideas. Concepts and ideas that are *outside the box* at times may need to come from someone outside the normal decision-making body. Nonetheless, this is the arena that the presidents worked in and they perceive it to be valuable.

### **Fulfilling the Community College Mission of Serving Students**

Students remain the core foundation of most community colleges, and these three institutions are no different. There appears to be a conscious effort at all three colleges to ensure that the needs of students are met. Decisions pertaining to cutting programs and services and/or adding new services are evaluated based on the needs of students. With limited resources and funding, additional student services and programs are difficult to provide, without burdening the students with increased tuition and fee costs.

These institutions recognize that these decisions have to be made based on what is in the best interest of the students, but recognize that in order to attract more students, new programs and services are needed.

### **Lack of Complacency and Sense of Urgency**

There is a lack of complacency at these colleges. They have a sense of urgency about the opportunity to positively influence the next student. The cultures of the colleges are preoccupied with seizing the next opportunity. In the presidents' views, opportunities are limited for the would-be students in their service areas. This was evidenced in Scott's (Heartland Community College) statements:

It's all about recognizing what it takes, what you are going to need to increase the quality of life for the people in the area you are serving. The bottom line is... a lot of these people couldn't begin at a university. Many are first generation college students; they have jobs, or they come from a family that can't afford to send them on to a major university or any university. We are their only opportunity...

David discussed his sense of duty in ensuring a sense of urgency at Green Lake Community College:

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Our value is remembering and reminding people that there are rural Americans, that there are people who need an education that are place-bound, there are people who need an education that are on the lower economic social status and that their whole families are below the level of educational level attainment that you might expect...

### **Ability and Willingness to Change**

The presidents were all clear in their commitments (and willingness) to initiate change or adapt to change. The ability to change and the speed at which this change can happen is complemented by the small size and effective communications channels with their high-performing community colleges. The ability to change would be hampered by the lack of either of these. The presidents discussed change from an overall organizational view, but interestingly, David (Green Lake Community College) and Scott (Heartland Community College) specifically mentioned change coming about from the faculty ranks. Scott stated, "Our faculty were excited, so you create a climate and it's about climate. A climate of support, change, a climate of progress, and you keep your ears open, you listen to people, and you give them ownership of the place." David

(SWCC) explained his experience with faculty and change:

I have been quoted—my faculty can quote me, that at this institution and others—that I am sorry the profession they chose has changed on them, but it has ... I don't find faculty to be resistant to change, I find for them to need leadership to change, and that's just human nature. You know that's just human nature. Accepting change is part of the institutions' existence and it enhances their aptitude to survive.

Conditions may transform where small, rural-serving community colleges will become extinct. All of the presidents were in agreement that if their institutions were to close, an unfilled educational void would exist in rural America. Regardless of economic or political factors that may evolve, an educational need will still exist in the vast, isolated, and somewhat sparsely populated regions of this nation. These colleges are the only traditional public institutions of higher education available to these populations today.

Change for these rural colleges is measured on two scales. The first is external change such as funding, population loss, and employee attrition. For the most part, these colleges can do little to nothing about these changes except



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to adapt and conform. However, there is the change that comes from within. Change can occur in these institutions in relatively short order. They are not encumbered with levels of bureaucracies that restrict or delay change. They operate on survival mode and become adroit at confronting the issues they face.

## **Conclusion**

There are five internal characteristics of successful small, rural-serving community colleges that revealed themselves through the narratives of the presidents: (a) a climate of transparency, (b) effective and succinct communication, (c) fulfilling the mission of serving students, (d) lack of complacency coupled with a sense of urgency, and (e) the ability and willingness to change. These characteristics are the underpinning of the success of these colleges and have enabled them to be effective and efficient organizations. Though these institutions are faced with many

challenges, they are able to address them quickly and efficiently in a manner that enables them to continue to serve their students and communities. Individually, these internal characteristics are important, but it is the collective application of them that facilitates the colleges to achieve the status of high performing. In addition, it is these characteristics that are applied internally, but have a profound impact externally. The outward signs of success are a reflection and a manifestation of what is occurring internally in these institutions. Many community colleges face similar challenges as outlined by the presidents' discussions, but the impact of these challenges at the small rural-serving institution can become dire to the college and its community. It is the sum of the operations of these institutions, as well as their communities, leadership, faculty and staff, and especially their students who contribute to their resiliency and continued success as rural-serving colleges.

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