Rural Student Success Network

Enhancing and Evaluating Student Success Programs

Deadline: October 3, 2025
Timeline: October 2025 through June 2027

Rural-serving institutions (RSIs) are poised to have a profound impact on the communities they serve, but they often face significant challenges that can impede institutional impact. These institutions cater to a higher percentage of first-generation college students and students from low-income backgrounds. As such, RSIs play an integral role in supporting economic mobility for individuals and families and community economic health. Despite their importance, RSIs face compounding challenges that are often under-researched and under-supported, including declining enrollments due to demographic shifts, persistent barriers for transfer and adult learners, and limited institutional capacity to evaluate and scale effective practices. These challenges can keep students from reaping the benefits RSIs provide and RSIs from fulfilling their mission.

To help address these challenges and maximize institutional impact, Ithaka S+R and AASCU are collaborating to convene a group of institutions focused on tailoring programs, practice, and processes to the evolving needs of rural learners, including streamlining transfer, re-engaging adult learners, and aligning with workforce needs. This collaboration builds on deep expertise in facilitating inter-institutional learning and sharing actionable insights to provide selected institutions with the support and resources they need to address key challenges and support student success.

The Rural Student Success Network

Ithaka S+R will select up to 18 RSIs to create a cohort dedicated to contributing to shared knowledge pertaining to student success, developing systems for self-assessment and continuous improvement, and tailoring institutional approach to student outcome and economic data. Over the course of approximately a year and a half, participating institutions will identify student success goals, learn about evidence-based practices, receive customized technical support from Ithaka S+R, and receive institution-specific reports and insights. Selected institutions will engage with other participating institutions through virtual and in-person convenings, participate in quarterly virtual one-on-one check-ins with the Ithaka S+R team, and learn from both existing research and project insights. Institution-

specific reports will examine educational and economic outcomes based on available institutional, state, and federal data. Lessons learned from the network will be shared through a case study report and summative brief meant to provide a framework for other RSIs looking to maximize student success and completion.

Benefits of participation

Participation in the student success network will provide institutions with key resources to propel their student success goals forward and support degree attainment. Participating institutions will also contribute to key insights for a case study report and summative brief, which will highlight best practices and provide a roadmap for similar institutions looking to maximize student success and grow in the three focus areas.

The 18 selected institutions will form a cohort dedicated to contributing to shared knowledge pertaining to student success, developing systems for self-assessment and continuous improvement, and tailoring institutional approach to student outcome and economic data. The benefits for participants include:

1. **Access to a peer network**. Engage with fellow rural-serving institutions to share best practices and collaborate on student success initiatives.
2. **Data-driven decision making**. Receive customized reports and insights that recommend strategies to enhance student success programs to a) align with evidence-based practices, b) maximize enrollment and completion, and c) meet regional workforce needs.
3. **Technical assistance and expert guidance**. Ongoing support, capacity-building, and continuous learning planning assistance to enhance institutional effectiveness. This includes 1:1 technical assistance in between learning sessions.
4. **Institutional recognition**. Possible opportunities to present at national conferences and/or contribute to publications in collaboration with Ithaka S+R and AASCU.

The cohort members will engage in the network through virtual and in-person convenings, participate in quarterly virtual one-on-one check-ins with the Ithaka S+R team, and learn from both existing research and project insights. Institution-specific reports will examine educational and economic outcomes based on available institutional, state, and federal data. Ithaka S+R will draft and publish a public case study report and summative brief at the end of the grant period to provide a framework for other rural-serving institutions looking to maximize student success and completion.

Project funding and collaboration

This project is being coordinated collaboratively by Ithaka S+R and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities through generous support from ECMC Foundation.

Subgrant funding

Each selected institution will receive a **$15,000 subgrant** from Ithaka S+R to support staff participation in project activities, which include data sharing, convening attendance, and self-assessment activities.

Application process

Using the form linked below, please submit written responses to these three questions:

1. How does participation in this project align with your institutional goals for student success, particularly re-engaging adult learners, supporting transfer students, and meeting workforce needs?
2. What strengths, priorities, and capacities will your institution bring to this network, and how will you ensure meaningful engagement across stakeholders?
3. What challenges do you anticipate, and what types of support or learning would be most useful to your institution throughout this project?

Your responses along with a letter of support from your institution's president should be submitted through [this online form](https://surveys.ithaka.org/jfe/form/SV_88KrM3CtdDdKLmS)[1] **by October 3, 2025.** A selection decision will be made and communicated by October 14, 2025 following project team review.

Selection criteria

1. Institutional capacity to participate in outlined project activities and meaningfully engage with the student success network.
2. A clear vision for how this project aligns with institutional goals and how it can be integrated into current work.
3. Demonstrated vertical buy-in, including support from executive leadership, to maximize institutional impact by implementing student-centered practices that support student success, especially that of adult learners and transfer students.

Roles and expectations

1. Serve as a thought partner and active participant in each learning session and the final convening designed to assist members in identifying policies, practices, and processes that propel institutional student success goals.
2. Engage in technical assistance sessions meant to facilitate self-assessment and continuous improvement.
3. Collect and share programmatic and institutional data as necessary to craft institution-specific reports, guide continuous improvement, and identify key insights.

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[1] See form here: https://surveys.ithaka.org/jfe/form/SV_88KrM3CtdDdKLmS.

4. Dedicate staff time to participate in learning and technical assistance sessions and any minimal preparation for these activities.

Note: We estimate that the time commitment for providing relevant programmatic information and completing self-assessment activities is approximately eight hours, which should include collaboration between senior leaders and program administrators. Beyond this, institutions have the flexibility to engage as deeply as their capacity allows in individualized technical assistance and customized data reporting provided by Ithaka S+R.

Key activities planned for the Rural Student Success Network

1. Identify priorities related to student success and develop a plan to address existing gaps or build on current strengths, improving processes, policies, and therefore outcomes, related to student success.
2. Participate in up to four virtual sessions (90 minutes each) to explore current programs, policies, and processes and drive improvements, and attend an in-person convening with all participating institutions.
3. Complete pre- and post- meeting assignments to advance project work and attend 1:1 virtual meetings (approximately one hour) with Ithaka S+R coaches in the months between learning sessions to check-in on progress.
4. Identify, collect, and share relevant student outcome data for institution-specific reports.
5. Complete a survey to capture key details about each institution's student success programs specific to the three focus areas and a self-assessment of existing student success programs.
6. Provide feedback and input to Ithaka S+R and AASCU regarding process and learnings that will be used as part of the evaluation of this project provided to the funder.