
The MidSouth Partnership for Rural Community Colleges: Building Public Policy while Building Rural Communities

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The MidSouth Partnership (MSP) for Rural Community Colleges is a collaboration of Alcorn State University (ASU), Mississippi State University (MSU), and the rural-serving community colleges served by the MidSouth. Planning for the Partnership was initiated in 1995 as conversations between representatives of several Mississippi community colleges, Mississippi's land-grant universities, The Phil Hardin Foundation, in Meridian, Miss., a Mississippi philanthropic organization, and program officers of The Ford Foundation (New York).

Reflecting on the role public policy actions at the federal and state level played in launching our partnership, our institutions, like the rural regions we serve, swim upstream against currents of public policy neglect; struggle against the shifting tides of economic realities; and bear the weight of consistent underfunding. The policy impacts on rural communities are an afterthought—if they are given any thought at all. It could be said that policy inactions or dysfunctional policies led to the launching of the MidSouth Partnership.

The founding partners of the MSP were motivated by the continuing decline of our rural communities and by outflows of people, jobs, and resources. At the outset, state or federal policies, which contributed to or ameliorated these conditions, were not discussed. Those discussions came later and are ongoing. The conversations were about issues impacting the people served by our state's community colleges. The topics included underdeveloped human capital and

lifting people and communities from poverty. The multiple challenges of rural economic development were explored. A major concern was the need for new and renewed leadership in our community colleges and universities.

The planning team explored more effective ways of linking the community development mission of land-grant universities and the community service mission of community and junior colleges. This has not been an easy journey. We have not achieved our destination. But we are firmly and mutually committed to pursuing our dream of making place and culture count in the process of building *sustainable* rural communities.

I am a latecomer to the story of the MidSouth Partnership for Rural Community Colleges, having assumed the presidency of Mississippi State University in January 2003. While the MidSouth Partnership was launched during the administration of my predecessor, I quickly discovered that this initiative was well-aligned with my personal priorities of:

- Access and excellence in educational opportunity,
- Expansion of outreach and community development, and
- Leadership in research and economic development.

Last spring, MSU celebrated 125 years of leadership and service to the state. Founded in 1878 as authorized in the Morrill Act of 1862 and known for

many years as Mississippi A & M, the “People’s University” has been and remains a major force in improving the quality of life and economic prospects of the people we serve. Today, MSU serves more than 16,000 students. With a presence in every county, the university is well-positioned to support community development activities across our state.

As part of its renewed and expanded commitment to outreach, the university has co-aligned the Division of Continuing Education with the Mississippi State University Extension Service to make better use of scarce resources. It also has added an Industrial Outreach Service to better serve the small and mid-sized industries across the state and to help communities recruit more manufacturing and technology jobs.

Without a definition of “rural,” Mississippi is definitely a rural state—geographically, psychologically, and economically—and in the level of educational attainment. Mississippians, like many rural people, have a profound pride in place. But we also are a people encumbered by:

- Underinvestment in human capital,
- A history of racial division and strife, and
- A last-place psychological complex—a perspective reinforced as one does the numbers of economic and educational analysis.

The weight of 49th and 50th place rankings continually challenges, as well as burdens the people. The Rural School and Community Trust (Arlington, Va.) recently asserted: “Rural education is more important in Mississippi than in any other state.”

Mississippi State University is engaged in supporting educational improvement across the state. We are the largest producer of primary and secondary teachers in Mississippi. We host a nationally funded early childhood education initiative on

enhanced learning potential for young children, and we maintain a variety of programs and services, supporting our public schools at every level. We also collaborate with Alcorn State University and the community colleges of Mississippi and our neighboring states in operating the MidSouth Partnership for Rural Community Colleges.

Last year—through the leadership of Mississippi’s senior senator, Thad Cochran, and 3rd District Congressman Chip Pickering—we were able to secure congressional support for the MidSouth Partnership. This support has allowed the partnership to invest in a research agenda defined by the community colleges participating in our work. For Mississippi’s land-grant universities and its community college partners, linking the policy research agenda to the community and economic development issues facing our state and region is a high priority. Implementing our findings is an equally high priority.

Our colleagues at Alcorn State University bring the experiences, expertise, and vision of a fellow land-grant university to the MidSouth Partnership. Both ASU and MSU operate campuses adjacent to community colleges. Alcorn’s Natchez campus and Mississippi State’s Meridian campus are closely linked to the community colleges of their regions. Additionally, significant portions of the total students enrolled at the universities begin their higher education journey at the state community colleges. MSU also now has a joint on-line degree program with a community college for preparing teachers.

Mississippi’s community and junior colleges and our land-grant university grew from the same rural agricultural environment. A majority of the state’s two-year colleges emerged from agricultural high schools between 1910 and 1925. Most, like MSU and ASU, were located away from population centers. Today, the community colleges, which grew out of agricultural high schools, shape the quality of life in Mississippi’s small towns, such as Scooba,

Moorhead, Decatur, Ellisville, Utica, Wesson, Perkinston, Goodman, Booneville, Fulton, Poplarville, Summit, Coahoma, Raymond, and Senatobia. The average population of these communities is approximately 2,600 people, including students residing in campus housing. Considered “mislocated” by many champions of suburban America, Mississippi’s community colleges are well-located to serve as trusted intermediaries in rural regional development.

One of the benchmarking reports on our region titled “The State of the South” is developed by MDC Inc. of Chapel Hill, N.C. The Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC)—a collaboration of the 29 land-grant institutions of the region with headquarters at Mississippi State University—accepted a lead role in producing a Mississippi version of the most recent edition of this report. Other partners for this project were three Mississippi philanthropic foundations, the MidSouth Partnership for Rural Community Colleges, and the state’s community colleges.

SRDC and MDC partnered to conduct research focused on Mississippi that was shared in three daylong, strategically located gatherings, and in an executive briefing that followed these sessions. The report is titled “Rural Responses to the New Economy.” It calls for:

- Reaching across old boundaries;
- Retooling communities, as well as workers;
- Overcoming old mindsets; and
- Building and sustaining leadership capacity.

MSU and the MSP are committed to “reaching across old boundaries.” To paraphrase a line from Mark Drabenscott: “Twenty-first century opportunities are no respecters of lines drawn by 19th century surveyors.”

In one of those “reaches across old boundaries,” last January, we participated in the second annual “Summit of the Commission on the Future of East Mississippi and West Alabama.” The event was held at the University of West Alabama, in Livingston, Ala., a neighboring regional institution. It included participation from four Mississippi community colleges, and two Alabama community colleges. Alabama Gov. Bob Riley and Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour were featured presenters.

One of our community college presidents, Phil Sutphin, chairs the commission, which includes representation from six west central Alabama counties and 10 east central Mississippi counties. The John C. Stennis Institute of Government at Mississippi State University has assisted the commission in numerous ways, including the creation of a prototype regional benchmarking system called “The Cycle of Prosperity.” We look forward to hosting the third annual summit at the Meridian campus of Mississippi State University next January.

We also look forward to reviewing our regional report card based on the “Cycle of Prosperity” benchmarks. We believe our actions reflect our mutual acceptance of the challenge of “reaching across old boundaries.” The MidSouth Partnership is committed to developing and sustaining leadership capacity within our community colleges. We believe that leadership capacity and vision must be built simultaneously. We know both must be grounded in the life of the communities we serve.

In the early 1990s, business leaders, community developers, and community college leaders joined to suggest a major repositioning of Mississippi’s community and junior colleges. “The Mississippi Millennium Report” issued in 1993 concluded: “There is no strong program for training community college leaders in Mississippi or any contiguous state. A program should be initiated with a strong emphasis on economic, community, and workforce development, rather than on school administration.” The

consultants also noted that leadership development should focus on rural issues.

In 1994, our MSU colleagues collaborated with the community colleges of our state in a leadership development program. To date, the revamped MidSouth Community College Fellowship Program (MCCFP) has served more than 300 community college leaders from eight states. The emphasis of the fellowship program is the role of the community college in rural community development. Fellowship program alumni include two new college presidents in Mississippi and campus deans in Mississippi, Alabama, and North Carolina.

Building upon the MCCFP, the partnership worked to create several degree programs including a doctorate in rural community college leadership. This program has been hailed as a model of interdisciplinary programming, addressing the silos of interest that we build within our universities and community colleges. Today, more than 150 doctoral students are engaged in the study of rural development, rural government, and regional economics, in addition to the professional higher education courses in law, finance, management, and institutional governance. Master's degrees in workforce education leadership and a Master of Arts in community college teaching have been developed at the request of community college leaders.

Our colleagues in the community colleges of our region have been enthusiastic and encouraging in the development of the partnership. Much of that support has been driven by waves of retirements of key faculty and administrative leaders. This leadership turnover has been accompanied by enrollment growth, changes in programming demands, and the need to provide a staff that effectively serves diverse student populations.

Several parallel programming activities are under way that support and reinforce the thrust of the MidSouth Partnership. In 2002, the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University

and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development at Iowa State University accepted the responsibility of carrying forward the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI), funded by the Ford Foundation. A major goal of the RCCI is to strengthen the capacity of rural community colleges and land-grant Extension personnel, so they jointly can serve as catalysts in advancing the community and economic development agendas of rural places within common services areas.

Capitalizing on the resources of land-grant universities and community colleges in collaborative community and economic development is a huge opportunity. Educational institutions and the communities they serve are being called on to do more with less. The RCCI and the MSP model of cooperation and collaboration represent a new way of doing business. The MidSouth Partnership and the Southern Rural Development Center provide direct support to the Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA), a membership organization that grew out of the national demonstration phase of the RCCI program. The policy research interests of the RCCI, the RCCA, and the MSP are strongly linked. We are committed to taking up the challenge of examining the impacts of public policy decisions on the rural communities we serve.

The MidSouth Partnership is supporting research and addressing funding equity and rural community colleges. A nationwide study of the barriers, incentives, and best practices regarding the community development role of rural community colleges has been launched. We are reviewing the impact of student aid policies on rural-serving community colleges. A national program to encourage graduate study of rural community college issues, the Rural Dissertation Research Initiative, will provide financial support for up to 20 dissertations per year.

Issues of workforce development, student retention and success, program articulation, student financial aid, developmental education, welfare

reform, and others are being addressed by the partnership. The first formal publication of the MidSouth Partnership examines opportunities to improve education and training for recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in Mississippi. The goal is the creation of policy research that leads to action.

The MSP is not a destination and not a single program. Rather, it is a shared journey to lift up rural people and communities. Building bridges across the cultural and economic fault lines of the communities that ASU, MSU, and the community college partners serve occasionally tests each partner's resolve.

Working around institutional arrangements created to serve single and complex public institutions frequently slows our progress. Developing the discipline to ground our work in the needs of those people and communities we serve and maintaining our customer focus is not easy. We've learned that our nation's rural-serving community colleges are an underused asset in stemming the tide of rural decline. People in Mississippi tend to trust their local community college.

However, as we move forward, we increasingly are aware of the significance of the need for public policies that reflect the realities of life in contemporary rural America. Rural America is burdened by a heritage of quick fixes, followed by long spans of inattention. Much can be accomplished if we don't worry about who gets the credit. Rural Americans must learn how to hold hands as they cross the bridge to the future.

What have we learned about the role public policy can play in the regions we serve? There are many yet-to-be-resolved issues for policymakers committed to integrated, balanced, and sustainable rural development. Place-focused coordination of programs requires continual rethinking by public policymakers and by those of us engaged in program delivery. Creating an environment that encourages communities to join

forces in recruiting and accommodating industry is essential for success. Likewise, old fiefdoms for workforce development are beginning to yield to broader, multicounty approaches.

Working across jurisdictional lines created by 19th century surveyors is difficult. Program compartments created by public policymakers tied to the past offer equally challenging barriers. Working across program interests, agency structures, and institutional cultures is frequently as difficult as reaching across county and state lines. These boundary lines of sector and program, created to facilitate delivery of government services, are especially burdensome in the small, distressed rural communities we serve.

We believe our colleagues at ASU, our team at MSU, and our partners at the regional community colleges *together* share an opportunity to demonstrate model leadership that gives priority to people and place. Certainly, we share a work in progress. The partnership embraces the challenge of building rural communities while building public policies. The land-grant universities of Mississippi and our community college partners are greatly encouraged by others' interest in their story.