

REGIONAL PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: EXPANDING HIGHER EDUCATION'S ROI FOR STUDENTS AND COMMUNITIES

THE UPSHOT

What do Western Carolina University in North Carolina and Portland State University in Oregon have in common, other than that you may not have heard of them? Both are regional public universities (RPUs), a group of regionally-focused colleges and universities that educate 70% of all students (nearly seven million annually) attending four-year public institutions in the United States each year.¹ With missions to foster postsecondary access, regional well-being, and student-centeredness, the 474 RPUs provide incredible value and return on investment (ROI) for their students and serve as anchors for their communities.² These institutions enroll the students who make up the “new majority” of Americans—including students who are the first in their families to attend college, students of color, rural students, adult learners, and veterans—while keeping costs low and barriers to entry reasonable.³

The affordability of RPUs is a major draw for students—and for good reason. Thirty-eight percent of RPU students are eligible for Pell Grants, and these institutions continually serve their students well. RPUs generate greater upward mobility for Americans than any other type of college or university.⁴ RPUs also deliver strong returns after graduation. In Third Way's Economic Mobility Index, 76% of the public institutions in the top tier of colleges and universities generating mobility are RPUs.⁵ When comparing cost of attendance to post-graduate earnings, four out of the top 10 institutions on Third Way's Price-to-Earnings Premium are RPUs.⁶ For the everyday American, RPUs are where access and affordability meet, allowing students to pursue quality higher education that leads to economic and job security.



THIRD WAY



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The upward mobility that RPUs generate extends to the broader regions they serve. Children who live near an RPU experience better economic and social outcomes than those living in regions without an RPU because people in these regions experience higher high school and college completion rates.⁷ People who grow up in a county with an RPU are also more likely to be employed and married and less likely to be incarcerated.⁸ These social and economic outcomes are most pronounced for low-income children, but all income levels benefit from living near an RPU. The connection that RPUs have to their communities is an important component of their local economic development efforts. Many RPUs align their degree offerings with local economic and workforce needs, support small business incubation, and partner with industry and business leaders to support regional economic development. Because of this, regions with RPUs are better protected from economic shocks and recover more quickly from recessions than those without RPUs.⁹

As the backbone of the American university system, RPUs fulfill the promise of higher education by uplifting students and communities and by leading their graduates to financial security and a better quality of life.¹⁰ However, RPUs are often ignored or misunderstood, garnering little media or policymaker attention and receiving lower per-student funding than non-RPUs. This brief describes the types of RPUs that exist and the students and regions that they serve, helping policymakers understand how these vital institutions contribute to their constituents while offering policy recommendations to best support RPUs in generating ROI and value for their students and communities.

NARRATIVE

What Makes RPUs Unique?

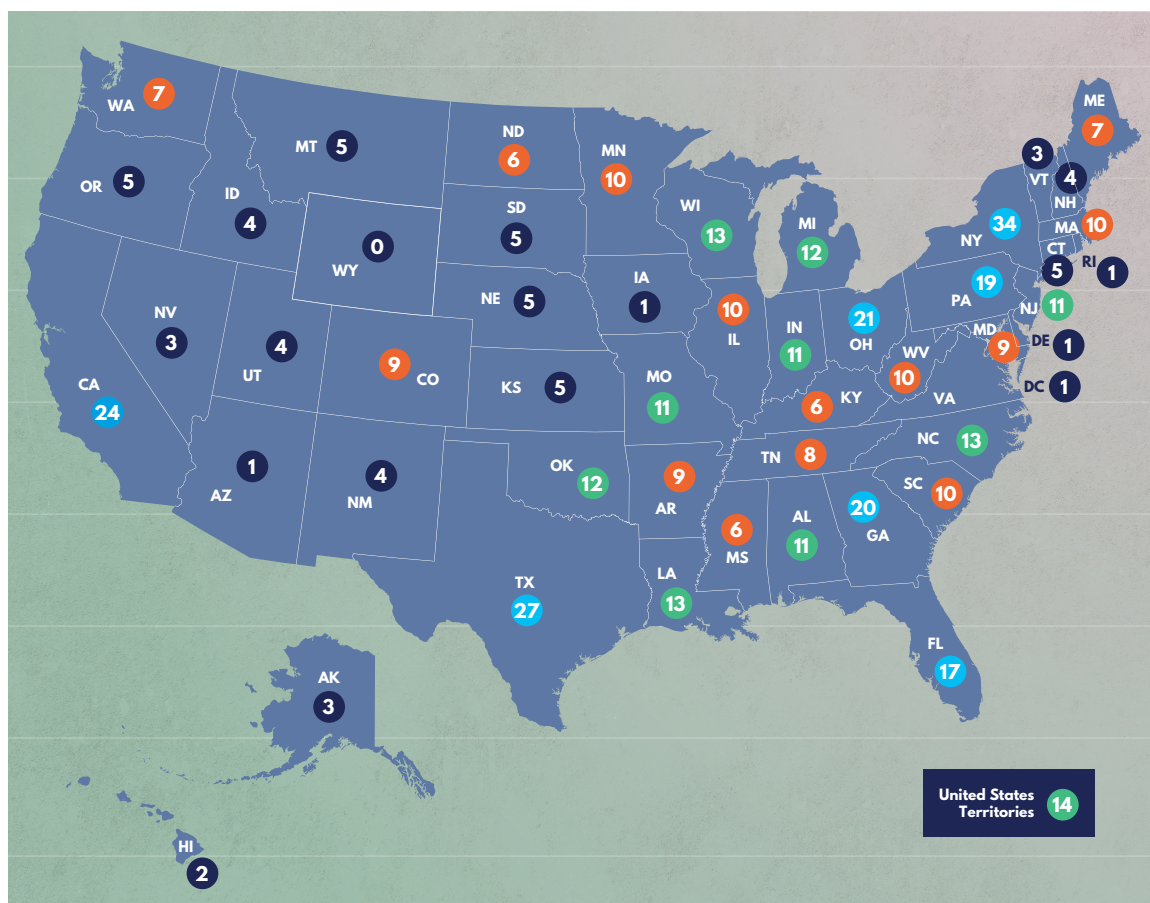
Many RPUs were established between 1839 and 1930 as normal schools or teachers colleges needed to staff the growing US public school system.¹¹ Today, RPUs remain vital contributors to the K-12 school system, graduating 80% of education degrees granted by four-year public institutions.¹² RPUs have evolved to align degree offerings with regional economic needs, offering employment-ready degrees in business, communications, STEM, and health professions.¹³ RPUs also address critical health care worker shortages, an important service in rural areas that are often medically underserved.¹⁴ Across their communities, RPUs support people at all stages of life, including when they are born and receive medical care from trained nurses, when they enter public schools staffed by graduates of these institutions, when they pursue college degrees, and when they need support starting small businesses or hiring employees.

Unlike the elite colleges and universities that often dominate conversations about American higher education, RPUs rarely receive national media attention for their contributions. Yet RPUs serve counties that experience higher rates of persistent poverty and childhood poverty than other schools, and 50% of the US population lives in the same county as an RPU.¹⁵ They also receive fewer resources, including state and federal funding, to support these regional needs.

These universities do not often pursue prestige or fame as non-RPUs do; they instead evaluate their organizational success by how many students they educate and how well they serve their communities, making them highly unique postsecondary institutions.

The map below shows the geographic spread of RPUs throughout the country—an intentional choice by state policymakers to foster postsecondary access across wide swaths of the country. In light of their place-based missions, RPUs often have a compass directional or a town or city name in their title (such as the University of Northern Colorado, University of Michigan Flint, University of West Florida, Texas A&M University Kingsville, Colorado State University Pueblo) with their names signaling the regions that they serve.

Figure 1. Location of Regional Public Universities, by State or Territory



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What Types of RPUs Are There?

Far from an amorphous group, there are diverse types of RPUs that distinguish themselves by the regions and students that they serve. In 2022, we published a report with the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) that found that 49% of RPUs are rural-serving institutions (RSIs), meaning they serve rural communities through their degree offerings and broader institutional activities.¹⁶ The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) also found that 36% of RPUs met the eligibility requirements for being a Minority Serving Institution (MSI).¹⁷ In our latest research, we've taken a look under the hood and uncovered five distinctive types of RPUs that serve their students and communities in unique ways.

TYPE 1: Regionally-Focused Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

The first type of RPU is regionally-focused HBCUs. Sixty-eight percent of students enrolled in these RPUs are Pell Grant recipients, and these institutions have an average overall enrollment of 5,126 students. They are largely located in the Southern United States and serve regions with high unemployment and low household income. Almost one out of five regionally-focused HBCUs employ open-enrollment policies, lowering the barrier to entry for all students—particularly for adult learners attending part-time. This RPU type is also affordable, with an average annual tuition and fees of \$7,953. They have the highest average doctoral student enrollment of all five types, making them important producers of Black and African American doctorate holders. Morgan State University in Maryland is an example of a regionally-focused HBCU and recently received a \$5 million grant from the National Nuclear Security Administration to start a nuclear engineering program, with the goal of diversifying this engineering field.

TYPE 2: Accessible, mid-sized, master's degree-granting RPUs

The second RPU type excels in producing master's degree graduates and fostering postsecondary access. Master's degree-granting RPUs include 30 Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and three Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI). These are mid-size RPUs, with average enrollments close to 10,000 students. With their demonstrated commitment to access, these RPUs have the highest acceptance rate of all RPU types, and 39% of students attending these RPUs are students of color. Most of these schools are located in the Midwest and the South. A representative RPU of this type is Angelo State University in Texas, an HSI that *GI Jobs* has designated a "Military Friendly" campus each year since 2010.¹⁸

TYPE 3: Rural-Serving and CUNY RPUs

This type includes both rural and urban-serving RPUs that are geographically different in their service areas but share commitments to fostering postsecondary access. These RPUs have the second highest acceptance rate of the RPU types and serve the highest proportion of part-time students, two metrics that underscore how these RPUs foster access to students who must

work while in college.¹⁹ Strikingly, this type includes a large share of rural-serving institutions, as designated by ARRC, as well as several City University of New York (CUNY) RPUs. This type includes seven HBCUs, eight Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), and four AANAPISIs. These RPUs receive the second-lowest state appropriations of all RPU types, which aligns with prior research showing RSIs are underfunded relative to other institution types.²⁰ Considering their responsiveness to the needs of rural communities, this RPU type also awarded a high number of agricultural degrees. Adams State University in Colorado is a representative RSI of this type. It is a leading prison education provider that gained attention for employing the first incarcerated faculty member to teach courses.²¹ York College is a representative CUNY of this type and holds both HSI and AANAPISI designations, demonstrating this institution's student diversity, which reflects the city in which it is located.

TYPE 4: *Large, Urban-Serving MSIs*

Type 4 is distinctive from the other types because it contains RPUs that are much larger in size and because all but two RPUs of this type holds at least one MSI designation, with some holding multiple MSI designations or designated as “emerging” MSIs. This type includes urban-serving institutions spread throughout the country, rather than just in New York as Type 3 does, and this type does not include any RSIs. Type 4 RPUs have average enrollments of 18,017 and high numbers of students of color and Pell Grant recipients—an average of 75% and 54%, respectively. Many large, urban-serving RPUs meet the required enrollment thresholds for multiple MSI designations, including AANAPISI, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian (ANNH) Serving, and HSI. With their location in urban areas and tendency to serve students of color and low-income students, these RPUs are particularly important for addressing urban inequities. A representative RPU of this type is the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV). Sixty percent of UNLV's alumni remain in Nevada after graduation, with many graduates working in education and tourism/hospitality—two important industries for the state.

TYPE 5: *Puerto Rican Hispanic-Serving RPUs*

All Puerto Rican Hispanic-serving RPUs are located in Puerto Rico and hold the HSI designation. This is the most affordable RPU type, with tuition and fees that averaged just under \$5,000 in 2022. Reflecting Puerto Rico's racial demographics, this type also has the highest enrollment of students of color (99.7% of students). They serve a region with high economic needs, high unemployment, and low household incomes. These RPUs are extremely important to the Puerto Rican economy, as their top degree conferrals are in agriculture, health, and business, aligned with the employment needs of the island.²² Due to the nature of the Puerto Rican economy and government and Puerto Rico's territorial status, these RPUs receive the lowest state appropriations of all types. A representative RPU of this type is the University of Puerto Rico—Aguadilla, which offers continuing education to health professionals on the island.

Table 1. Characteristics of Regional Public Universities by Type

	Type 1 Regionally- Focused HBCUs	Type 2 Accessible, Mid- Sized, Master's Degree- Granting RPUs	Type 3 Rural-Serving RPUs	Type 4 Large, Urban, Regional- Serving MSIs	Type 5 Puerto Rican Regionally- Focused HSIs
Institutional Characteristics					
Number of RPUs	37	183	207	35	10
Percent of all RPUs	7.8%	38.8%	43.9%	7.4%	2.1%
Acceptance Rate	76.1%	82.2%	82.8%	71.4%	68.0%
Percent of Institutions with Open Enrollment Policies	16.2%	7.7%	20.3%	11.4%	0%
Average Enrollments	5,126	11,644	6,665	18,017	3,579
Percent of Institutions with MSI Designation	91.9%	17.5%	24.6%	94.3%	100.0%
Average State Appropriations	\$43,044,402	\$64,441,538	\$39,408,551	\$144,811,123	\$26,702,484
Percent of Institutional Revenue from Federal Grants and Contracts	25.2%	6.4%	7.0%	12.0%	34.7%
Student Characteristics					
Students of Color	85.3%	38.7%	37.9%	74.8%	99.7%
Part-Time Students	25.3%	32.9%	30.3%	28.8%	12.5%
Pell Grant Recipients	68.7%	43.2%	44.5%	54.3%	85.6%
Master's Enrollment	17.5%	20.4%	17.2%	19.7%	4.3%
Doctoral Enrollment	5.0%	3.1%	2.4%	3.1%	1.2%
Regional Characteristics					
Predominant Census Division	South Atlantic	East North Central	South Atlantic	Pacific	Territory
Median Household Income	\$56,402	\$57,655	\$59,276	\$80,467	\$21,023
Unemployment Rate	3.8%	3.4%	3.3%	3.8%	6.9%

Source: Authors' analysis of IPEDS and American Community Survey data.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Regional public universities are beacons of access, affordability, and value with missions that allow them to quickly adapt to meet the needs of their students and communities. Despite their significant contributions to society, RPUs are underfunded relative to non-RPUs, and policy is often tailored to the needs of non-RPUs, weakening the ability of RPUs to serve their students and communities. RPUs receive \$1,091 less per student in state appropriations than non-RPUs, yet RPUs rely on state appropriations for their operations to a greater extent than non-RPUs, which have a broader array of revenue streams. But RPUs rely on state appropriations for their operations to a greater extent than non-RPUs, which have a broader array of revenue streams. RPUs also receive, on average, \$9 million less in federal grants and contracts and have smaller endowment assets than non-RPUs (averaging \$28,968 less per student than non-RPUs). As a result, they have fewer tenured and full-time faculty and staff than non-RPUs. Beyond funding inequities, the design of federal grant programs and other state-based policies often does not account for the RPU mission, creating additional hurdles for the sector. We offer the following policy recommendations to strengthen the ability of RPUs to provide ROI and value for their students and society.

1. **Establish a Region-Serving Institution designation.** Aside from the land-grant university designation, most of the existing federal institutional designations, such as those designating Minority Serving Institutions, are focused on enrolling specific student groups. A formalized federal Region-Serving Institution designation would create new possibilities for RPUs to serve their broader communities. It could be given to RPUs or community colleges that have demonstrated commitments to fostering resilient communities, promoting public health, assisting with recovery from natural disasters, and strengthening local economies. Such a designation and funding program could create spiral-up effects in communities as RPUs are better positioned to serve their regions and students.
2. **Establish federal-state funding partnerships and increase state funding for RPUs.** States play an important role in securing the success of RPUs and expanding the positive outcomes they create for students and communities, which is why we recommend that states increase their investments in their RPUs. Prior research demonstrates that institutional resources correlate with student outcomes, with institutions that have greater resources providing better learning and professional opportunities to their students.²³ While RPUs generate impressive outcomes for their students and communities, they have lower graduation and retention rates than non-RPUs.²⁴ State policymakers have an opportunity to expand access and success to Americans by increasing funding for RPUs. In most states, they enroll larger shares of in-state students than non-RPUs, and RPU graduates are more likely to remain in-state after graduating, making them vital economic drivers.²⁵ State policymakers frequently indicate their interest in leveraging higher education to promote a strong workforce and healthy communities, and RPUs

are best positioned to support these goals when they are well-funded. To address these funding inequities, state policymakers should audit existing funding models to identify how their designs and implementations yield fewer resources for RPUs. We also encourage the federal government to create incentive programs and grants for states to encourage their immediate and long-term investment in RPUs.

3. **Review and modify existing federal programs to better support RPUs.** There are a variety of federal grants and programs for which RPUs could be competitive with some modifications. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the US Department of Labor offer economic and workforce development grants that often require institutional matching funds, which can be difficult for RPUs to guarantee, given their lower resource bases. We suggest that waivers be permissible for RPUs to make these grants feasible. As region-serving institutions, much of the research that RPUs conduct is applied and is intended to address regional knowledge needs. We invite the National Science Board and the National Institutes of Health to add or adapt existing programs to spur innovation and support for applied research within the sector. Finally, we recommend that federal agencies that fund higher education establish review panels staffed by RPU leaders who can audit and assess existing grant programs and suggest how to modify these opportunities so that RPUs can be more competitive. A good starting place for such an audit would be the existing funding programs led by the Department of Education, some of which have onerous application requirements that make it difficult for RPUs to apply, given their limited staff capacity. The Department of Education could also provide targeted training and directed coaching to support RPU staff in preparing competitive grant applications.
4. **Differentiate state and federal policy for different RPU types.** This brief describes the different RPU types that exist, and we invite policymakers to differentiate their existing postsecondary policies and funding programs to enhance the ability of these different RPU types to serve their regions and students. For example, a rural-serving RPU and an urban-serving CUNY in the same state or legislative district will enact the RPU mission in distinctive ways and will serve communities that have vastly different needs. State and federal policy is often a “one-size-fits-all” proposition that ignores these differences. Yet state policymakers could differentiate existing policies, such as the design of performance-based funding and student financial aid programs, to position unique RPU types to serve their students and communities well.

METHODOLOGY

We undertook a two-phase mixed methods process to classify and identify different types of RPUs. In the qualitative first phase, we analyzed the mission statements of all 474 RPUs identified in previous research.²⁶ We found 19 salient characteristics from the mission statements and created dichotomous variables indicating whether each institution's mission statement had the given characteristic. We combined these 19 variables with 52 other institution-level and county-level variables to create a dataset of 71 variables across the 474 RPU institutions.

In the quantitative second phase of the analysis, we used cluster analysis to classify each of the RPUs into one of several different types based on patterns of values in the 71 variables. Cluster analysis is a statistical method for grouping similar objects or data points based on shared characteristics, allowing categories to emerge from data rather than pre-existing labels or assumptions. Preliminary analysis indicated support for five types of RPUs; each RPU in the dataset was sorted into one of these five types. We then explored the differences between these types using descriptive statistics, gave each type of RPU a name that reflects its unique type, and identified representative institutions for each type to illustrate its characteristics.

More detailed methodological information is available [here](#). A full list of all 474 RPU institutions by type can be found [here](#).

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