Community college graduates return to their rural roots

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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QUESTION
How do Nebraska’s community colleges best serve the education needs of the state’s rural residents?

ANSWER
Nebraska’s community colleges are an integral part of rural Nebraska. The community colleges are governed by locally elected boards that are accountable to their local taxpayers and provide for the most accessible and, in many rural parts of the state, the only higher education institutions.

The community colleges provide opportunities for students who may be place-bound to further their education on a very local level.

Graduates of community colleges tend to stay in the local area where they receive their education and thus enhance the economic viability of many rural communities. There are many rural counties in Nebraska that have significant levels of poverty. Without the accessible and affordable community colleges, many individuals would not be able to pursue higher education. They have reasonable tuition rates and are totally open-admission institutions, ready to serve their local communities for higher education and job training.

The community colleges serve as the conduit for training many of the emergency responders and also for many of the employees of local hospitals, doctors’ offices and nursing homes. As the rural population of Nebraska continues to age, these services take on an ever-increasing role in keeping rural communities attractive places to live and work.

As technology continues to advance and more of the state becomes connected to broadband service, it becomes a challenge for the colleges to promote this new technology and also to provide opportunities for individuals in rural parts of the state to receive training for the use of these technology changes. Local community colleges are the best resource for this training, and the colleges are looking at getting more involved with precision agricultural training to make it possible for our farmers and ranchers to be as successful as possible.

Community colleges have entrepreneurship programs that enable businesses to be created and also aid in the expansion of existing businesses. They can also provide almost any kind of training that a business would need in order to update its workforce and stay current with the latest technology related to its needs.

The community colleges, in cooperation with the high schools in their areas, are offering many dual-credit courses that will enable high school students to take college-level courses so they are prepared for college and to gain some college credit already earned for their associate degree. This enables students to complete their college degree in a shorter time and at a more affordable cost. The community colleges are working with their local schools to create career academies so that students can be made aware of employment opportunities in their local communities.

When students are more aware of job opportunities, the student, in conjunction with his or her local school and a community college, can prepare an education pathway that will provide employment opportunities in the local area.

Community colleges pride themselves in being connected to their local areas and will continue to provide the services necessary for all of rural Nebraska to prosper. This connection is strengthened by having local funding through property taxes. This local funding requires the locally elected governing board to stay aware of the needs of their local businesses so that the college is prepared to provide training for both new and existing employees.

Community colleges are an integral part of economic development for their local areas. The locally elected boards are what provides this connection and really give meaning to the “community” in their name.