



How to Advocate for Regional Comprehensive Universities

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Regional comprehensive universities – such as Colorado State University Pueblo and the University of Central Florida – are public institutions established to foster college access and support civic and economic life across an entire region. Compared to other sectors of higher education, such regional institutions have been shown to create upward mobility, moving individuals from the lowest economic tier to middle and upper tiers. They educate half of all school teachers and partner with elementary and secondary schools to improve educational outcomes. Regional universities also educate 26% of all veterans receiving GI benefits and 27% of active duty service members who receive Department of Defense Tuition Assistance.

Accessible admissions policies and affordable tuitions at these institutions allow students of all backgrounds to pursue a college degree. Because of their outsized contributions, regional comprehensive universities have been called the “*workhorses of higher education*.” Although they are only one tenth of postsecondary institutions, they grant 30% of all degrees. Beyond conferring degrees, many of these universities also improve basic literacy and health outcomes in their regions. They do research and create archives to share regional histories and cultures, and they equip students with civic skills necessary for active democratic citizenship.

Although regional comprehensive universities serve vital roles, misconceptions persist about their quality and contributions – often discouraging policymakers from giving them full funding and support. Too often, these accessible institutions are assumed to provide low-quality education – the flip side of widespread presumptions about the high quality of elite universities with restricted access. Yet the facts are otherwise. Even though elite universities draw highly prepared students, they often provide marginal educational benefits compared to regional universities that accept nearly all applicants. *Some evidence* suggests that students actually learn more at regional comprehensive universities than higher prestige institutions.

Evidence for Advocacy

Given misconceptions, leaders of regional comprehensive universities must articulate the value of their work and engage policymakers across many levels, from local to state and federal. Local officials may foster relationships between regional comprehensive universities and schools, government agencies, businesses, and nonprofits; and such officials may also be able to improve funding by sponsoring levies and bond measures or encouraging private donors to give to the university. State legislators determine postsecondary appropriations and regulate how regional comprehensive universities operate. Federal policymakers are responsible for reauthorizing the Higher Education Act and setting the maximum level for Pell grants, both the sorts of decisions that profoundly affect streams of funds flowing to regional comprehensive universities.

As they push for support from all levels of government, regional comprehensive university leaders can leverage quantitative and qualitative evidence about their institutions’ transformative power. Key kinds of

evidence include:

- Information about institutional partnerships with schools, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and businesses – and assessments of partnership contributions, such as higher graduation rates at high schools involved in university partnerships.
- Assessment of the institution's economic impact – such as jobs created and businesses supported, investments in communities, and degrees granted in areas vital to the surrounding economy.
- Numbers of secondary school and government officials educated.
- Assessments of contributions to civic life and social equity, using Census data and measures developed in collaboration with regional leaders, as well as stories about new civic and professional skills gained by students. Few institutions now track such impacts, yet studies show that policymakers give more generous appropriations to civically engaged campuses. The University of Denver led a **promising effort** to measure the civic contributions of regional comprehensive universities.
- Data on residents pursuing continuing education, and the numbers of alumni graduates who have advanced from low-income to middle or high-income status. Also relevant are counts of veterans and active duty service members a university has educated, and estimates of area residents served by the university's cultural offerings through its theater and music programs and museums.
- Accounts of institutional operations can also demonstrate the ways in which lean staffing and effective organization make the university a smart, cost-effective public investment.

Effective Messengers Matter Too

To overcome the many challenges facing regional comprehensive universities, leaders must pay careful attention to the messengers and messages they deploy. Many higher educational institutions hire lobbyists – regional comprehensive universities should consider doing the same. In addition, and perhaps to greater effect, students and graduates now working as regional leaders should be invited to describe their college experiences. Members of trustee boards are frequently well connected and their regional and statewide stature can be leveraged. The kinds of information summarized above can be assembled into infographics, policy briefs, social media postings, reports, recorded videos, and testimony for lawmakers – and, as appropriate, all kinds of messengers can deliver the information suited to specific audiences.

Finally, leaders of regional comprehensive universities should encourage alumni and campus stakeholders to run for public offices, including legislative posts where they can affect pivotal funding decisions. Indeed, as many states consider consolidations, effective advocacy will likely determine institutional futures, especially for regional universities in rural and non-metropolitan areas. Leaders cannot afford to be modest; they must find vivid and measurable ways to dramatize the value of their institutions to community wellbeing and the lives of local students.

Read more in Lydia Supplee, Cecilia Orphan, and A. Moreno, *“The People’s Universities” As Legitimacy-Seeking Anchor Institutions: Tracing the History and Evolution of Regional Comprehensive Universities from 1970-2000* (Forthcoming).