



Why Regional Comprehensive Universities are Vital Parts of U.S. Higher Education

Cecilia M Orphan, University of Denver

Regional comprehensive universities have been called the “[people’s universities](#)” in recognition of their missions to provide access to higher education and support regional economies and civic and cultural life. There are roughly 430 of them spread across U.S. states and territories – institutions such as Portland State University (OR), the University of Central Florida, and Metropolitan State University of Denver (CO).

These are public universities, founded as teachers colleges, night schools, veterans’ educational centers, and technical colleges. Some 40% of historically black colleges and universities are also regional comprehensive universities. From the start, these universities have widened educational opportunity by lowering barriers to admission and prizing teaching and student-centered programming over research. Among all types of four-year colleges, regional comprehensive universities enroll the largest proportions of underrepresented students – including military veterans, adult learners, ethnic minorities, first-generation students, and immigrants. Furthermore, these universities are efficiently run. Although many flagship universities have staffs swollen with administrators and non-educational officials, regional comprehensive universities typically have lean administrations and operate at low cost.

Important Functions of Regional Comprehensive Universities

Regional comprehensive universities are indispensable to surrounding areas in many ways:

- They have evolved comprehensive offerings in tandem with their regions, adding degrees to address specific needs. They lead initiatives and conduct research in partnership with governmental, business, and other regional leaders, thereby helping to address issues ranging from poverty and voter participation to transportation and public recreation. Government leaders often consult university officials to define research questions and leverage findings to improve public services. Some of these institutions have improved local health outcomes. In Ohio, for instance, Shawnee State University provides [low-cost dentistry](#), an invaluable service given the health challenges facing the Appalachian region.

Local government officials are often graduates of regional comprehensive universities, which are important incubators of civic talent. Furthermore, these institutions serve as cultural and educational hubs by hosting plays, concerts, museums, and other low-cost public offerings. Many also archive and study [regional histories and cultures](#).

- Most regional comprehensive universities are stewards of their region’s public education systems. Together, they educate half of all U.S. school teachers, and some regional comprehensive universities have trained most of the school teachers, administrators, and staff in their regions. Their leaders also often partner with school officials to improve educational outcomes, and these universities are local access points to higher education.
- [Research](#) has shown that these institutions do a far better job of promoting upward mobility among low-income individuals than flagship or private universities. They educate 26% of all veterans receiving GI Bill benefits and 27% of active duty service members receiving Department of Defense Tuition Assistance. As college tuition skyrockets and public aid shrinks, these universities remain affordable options for students.
- Of course, regional comprehensive universities buoy area economies as employers and purchasers of goods and services. Beyond that, they serve as economic hubs with curricula that respond to regional workforce needs. Although only 10% of all U.S. postsecondary institutions, they confer 30% of all degrees – including 28% of agricultural degrees, 30% of business degrees, 26% of computer and information sciences degrees, 31% of foreign languages degrees, and 27% of mathematics degrees. Regional universities also act as incubators where entrepreneurs and business leaders can receive

support and faculty expertise.

Challenges to Meet

Despite their many important functions, regional comprehensive universities are chronically underfunded compared with flagship universities. Before the recession, public colleges received 70% of their budgets from state appropriations; now, on average states provide only half of public college funding. And some states cover just 12 to 15% of the budgets of their regional comprehensive universities. Because of funding cuts, these institutions have been forced to abandon important services. Furthermore, policymakers have recently proposed mergers affecting many of these institutions – which would undercut their regionally specific missions, especially in rural areas where they may be the largest employers and social service providers.

Thirty-seven states have implemented performance funding intended to reward postsecondary institutions for closing educational gaps among ethnic groups and improving state economies. Such rules could benefit regional comprehensive universities, but [research](#) reveals that they often lead to decreased educational access, relaxed academic standards, and diminished research productivity. Many policymakers remain committed to funding reforms that take little account of the typical regional comprehensive university's student body, where many enrollees are low-income students who work part time and juggle family responsibilities. Some institutions have been forced to raise admissions requirements to attract less diverse students from out of state. To avoid these downsides, policymakers should modify funding rules to measure and support regional comprehensive university efforts to enrich civic, economic, cultural, and educational wellbeing in their areas.

To strengthen U.S. educational access and regional development, policymakers and the public must recognize regional comprehensive universities as anchor institutions. At times, these institutions have been unfairly disparaged in the media as the “undistinguished middle child of higher education,” and “non-marquee” [institutions of last resort](#). Some regional comprehensive universities have responded by elevating research and admissions requirements, imitating elite universities. But this makes little sense. Policymakers should enhance support for these institutions, so they can continue to pursue their distinctive missions of enlarging college access and serving the economic and civic needs of surrounding regions.

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).