



GREATER TEXAS FOUNDATION

2021 Texas Rural Collaboration Convening

Four Keys to Collaboration in Rural Texas

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INTRODUCTION

WHO IS THIS REPORT FOR?

- If you are a rural leader looking to expand opportunities for students in your local community, the lessons offered here are for you.
- If you live in a more urban setting but are grappling with a challenge in your own backyard that requires collaboration, this report is for you, too.

Collaboration is key to solving complex problems—and it's hard work. It's not unusual for a partnership between organizations to start with great intentions only to split apart or lose steam.

Some partnerships buck that trend. Through strong leadership, a shared vision, and grit, they unite a diverse coalition of actors to make an incredible impact on their communities.

If you want to see successful collaboration in action, look to rural Texas.

It's difficult to overstate the importance of rural Texas. For one thing, it's huge—over 268,000 square miles, or about 85% of the state's land mass.¹ For another, it's rich in natural resources, contributing \$132B annually to the state's GDP through oil and gas, agriculture, forestry, and fishing.² Perhaps most importantly, rural Texas is home to more than 700,000 K-12 students.³

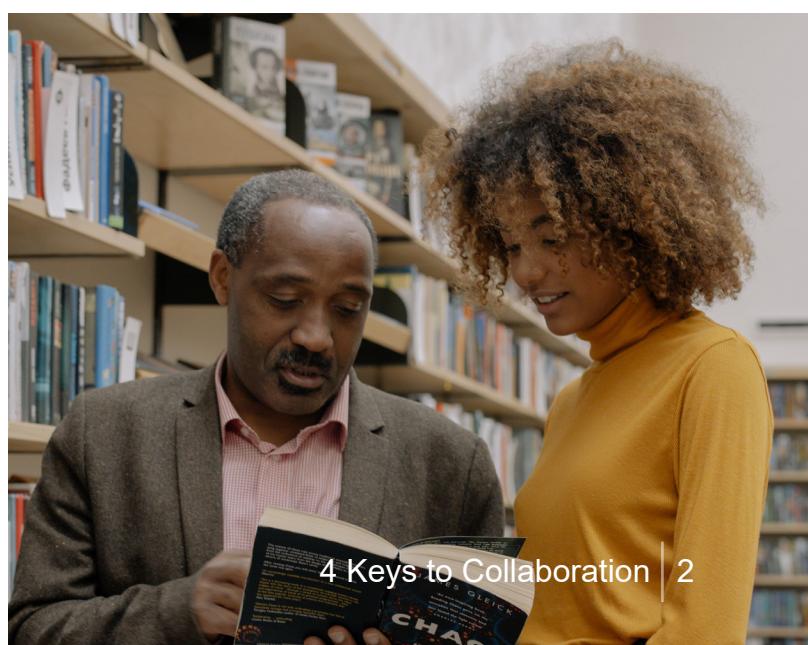
If rural Texas thrives, we all will.

Yet it can be difficult for smaller communities to provide their students with the resources they need to thrive after high school. In an

economy that increasingly requires young people to complete specialized postsecondary education credentials to secure living-wage careers, rural youth stand to benefit from advanced coursework, exposure to multiple career pathways, experiences of college environments, and in-depth advising.

But those resources can be difficult to deliver in communities that are physically distant from institutions of higher education and have limited access to broadband, and in small schools where staffing is lean.

If any challenge calls for collaboration, connecting rural students with college and career pathways is it. That's why Greater Texas Foundation dedicates a portion of its grantmaking funds for partnerships that build postsecondary supports in rural Texas. And there are a lot of them!



¹ Texas Rural Funders. 2019. Report for the Future of Rural Texas. https://www.dropbox.com/s/lcv3knxev28s8/Texas2036_Rural-Book%20One%20Page%20Spread.pdf?dl=0

² Texas Rural Funders. 2019.

³ Showalter, Daniel et al. 2019. Why Rural Matters 2018-2019: The Time Is Now. <https://www.ruraledu.org/WhyRuralMatters.pdf>



From the Rio Grande Valley to the Panhandle, from the Piney Woods to the Permian Basin, **education leaders across the state are joining forces across district and sectoral lines to build smart models that make sure students' college and career options aren't limited by geography.**

In November 2021, we invited more than 40 of these leaders into a shared virtual meeting space to share how they do it. This report summarizes four key collaborative practices we learned from this group. Each practice can be implemented at any point in the life cycle of a coalition, but they're most powerful when incorporated into the design from the very beginning.

As the saying goes, "**Many hands make light work.**" We hope that by sharing the collective wisdom of our colleagues in rural Texas, we can make your work a bit lighter.

ABOUT THE CONVENING

Greater Texas Foundation supports efforts to ensure all Texas students are prepared for, have access to, persist in, and complete a postsecondary education, with a particular emphasis on underserved and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations.

One component of our grant-making strategy is partnering with rural communities to build the supports students need to access and complete a postsecondary credential. The foundation hosted the Texas Rural Collaboration Convening virtually over Zoom on November 2-3, 2021 to ask:

How do we build, strengthen, and sustain pathways to opportunity for young people in rural Texas?

To help us answer this question, we invited 46 leaders of cross-sector partnerships that build pathways through postsecondary education and into the workforce in rural Texas communities.

These partnerships varied widely and included dual credit collectives, "grow-your-own" educator programs, regional work-based learning initiatives, and coalitions focused on

bringing college-and-career-related technical assistance to rural districts across the state.

For more information on the programs represented at the convening, please see our **Guide to Rural Education Collaboratives in Texas**.

The convening included a panel of students from rural Texas who spoke about their experiences participating in advanced coursework and work-based learning in high school; participant-led presentations on establishing and expanding college and career collaboratives in rural areas; and facilitated discussions on sustaining partnerships and programs in the long term.

This report summarizes major themes from the convening drawn from notes, recordings, artifacts, and a post-event survey.

We wish to acknowledge and thank our colleagues who designed and led sessions at the convening:

Denise Davis, Leadership and Instructional Support Coach

Bridget Devlin, Texas Impact Network

Alma Garcia, Leadership and Instructional Support Coach

Amy Hall, Big Country Manufacturing Alliance

Valerie Hill Jackson, Texas A&M University

Sylvia Leal, T.L.L. Temple Foundation

Maria Luna Torres, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension

Becca Myers, Education Partnership of the Permian Basin

Ines Polonius, Communities Unlimited, Inc.

Rodney Rodriguez, Educate Texas



Key Practice 1: Start with a Strong Foundation

More than anything, convening participants emphasized the importance of designing a partnership structure that can be sustained in the face of differing priorities and personalities, leadership turnover, and other challenges.

PUT THE PARTNERSHIP IN WRITING

In the words of Ines Polonius of Communities Unlimited, *"Make sure the collaboration lives on paper."* All the information and agreements associated with the partnership should be clearly documented to ensure clarity and transparency. This includes:

- The goals of the partnership and the commitments made by each participant.
- Shared norms that will guide any collaborative work.
- Organizational structure, e.g., procedures for meetings, responsible parties for each function of the partnership, expectations for communication.
- Memoranda of understanding detailing logistical considerations, e.g., procedures for sharing data; providing transportation, textbooks, and other resources to students; and maintaining facilities and utilities.
- Minutes of every meeting, including key action items.
- Financial transactions.

BUILD A DEEP BENCH

It is only a matter of time until a key player in the partnership moves or retires. These transitions can be smoothed out when they are planned for in advance and other knowledgeable, invested leaders stand ready to take the hand-off. Participants shared these strategies for successful transitions:

- Design a rotational or other shared leadership structure that gives multiple people the opportunity to perform tasks like developing agendas and leading meetings.
- Invite more than one representative from each partner organization to participate in the activities of the collaborative so the loss of one person becomes less critical.
- Develop leadership capacity in less experienced coalition members by, e.g., offering training or inviting them to participate in a working group.
- Communicate with stakeholders about known leadership transitions well in advance. Ideally, plan for a period of joint leadership between the incumbent and the incoming leader with a gradual phasing out of the incumbent.



Key Practice 1: Start with a Strong Foundation

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Though no one can plan for all possible contingencies, there are practical steps leaders can take to keep the partnership on course when it hits a bump in the road:

- Acknowledge from the outset that change is inevitable, and nothing worthwhile comes without risk. Make it a norm to treat perceived “failures” as learning opportunities.
- Assume that planning and implementation will take longer than expected and build buffers into the timeline.
- Return often to the written commitments of the partnership—its goals, norms, and decision-making processes—to remain grounded.

“Be prepared for the long haul. Be prepared for some hard work. There’s going to be challenges and bumps in the road. We’ve hit them ourselves. But if we hit a bump in the road, we’re willing to work through it.”

Amy Hall,
Workforce Solutions of
West Central Texas



MAKE ROOM AT THE TABLE

Participants agreed it is critical to make space for people from a broad range of backgrounds and perspectives to participate meaningfully in any collaborative effort. Partnerships should be designed to expand.

In fact, some collaboratives make a practice of leaving an empty chair at the table during meetings as a symbolic reminder that new partners are always welcome. The importance of deep and diverse stakeholder engagement was so important to our participants, it merits a section of its own. Read on for more insights on building inclusive partnerships.

Key Practice 2: Engage Your Stakeholders

Our colleagues shared how they involve community members with a stake in the college and career outcomes of young people—including students themselves.

FOCUS ON BUILDING TRUST

Trust is essential in any relationship. If you can demonstrate that your coalition is about what's best for students and the community, and you're pursuing your goals with integrity and competence, buy-in will follow. **How do you get there?**

- Approach the work with humility, acknowledging that the partnership depends on the expertise and contributions of every member.
- If you're coming from the outside, team up with a credible leader from within the community to conduct outreach to stakeholder groups.
- Communicate early and often.
- Prioritize developing relationships over "making asks."
- Ask each member of the collaborative what their "self-interest" is; in other words, what are they personally hoping to get out of their participation? Document each participant's self-interest and look for ways to acknowledge and address those priorities.
- Guide partners in identifying their shared goals, as well. As a group, develop a "We will know we are successful when ..." statement that includes concrete, measurable outcomes. Revisit these shared goals throughout the life of the partnership.
- Expect partners to **think differently**. Value the diverse perspectives they bring to the work.



"It's a community-based effort . . . By no means do we claim that [our organization] alone can change outcomes in these school districts. It really is a collaborative effort."

Maria Luna-Torres,
Rural Student Success Initiative

Key Practice 2: Engage Your Stakeholders

ENGAGE STUDENTS WITH CLEAR MESSAGING AND COMPELLING EXPERIENCES

Students are more likely to take advantage of college and career opportunities when they see relevance to their own goals and interests. They're more likely to persist in these opportunities and tell peers about them when they have high-quality experiences.

- Ensure students hear consistent encouragement from all sides—family, teachers, staff, and community—to participate in programming designed to prepare them for the future.
- Develop a variety of communication material that clearly explains what education pathways are available, what types of careers they can lead to, and how students can participate.
- Ensure diverse representation in marketing materials so students can envision themselves in any career field.

“The number one thing was support. If I needed an answer, they would find it... The support system is really what kept me going because there were times when I did feel like giving up, and their support held me together to finish.”

Veronica Cuellar,
Roscoe Collegiate ISD



- Design work-based learning activities that allow students to experience a range of occupations as well as make a positive impact on their communities.
- Look for ways students can interact with people who work at a variety of levels, including those in entry-level positions.
- To the extent possible, offer students a variety of options—but focus not on simply making programming available, but on delivering high-quality programming.
- Provide students with the supports they need to be successful, from access to devices to coaching on study skills.

Key Practice 2: Engage Your Stakeholders

MEET FAMILIES WHERE THEY ARE

Parents and other family members are often the strongest advocates for their children's education and carry essential knowledge of their children, culture, and community. Convening participants shared practices that have helped them build partnerships with families:

- Participate in community events and other gatherings to get to know families outside school.
- Formally include parent representatives in the structure of the collaborative.
- Offer opportunities for families to give input on program design and delivery.
- Ensure written materials are clear, concise, and in parents' home languages. Use non-written forms of communication, as well.

"We should acknowledge the great strengths that our families bring forward and stand in awe of them."

Valerie Hill-Jackson,
Texas A&M University/Brazos Valley Teach



- Be transparent about what is expected of families when students participate in programming, including the expected out-of-pocket cost, time commitment, and transportation.
- Consider what supports families may need to fully participate in programming. For example, would on-site childcare allow parents to attend informational meetings and workshops? Do they need connections to community resources to meet financial needs?

Key Practice 2: Engage Your Stakeholders

TALK STRATEGY WITH EMPLOYERS

Local employers have a vested interest in developing an educated workforce. Kelty Garbee of Texas Rural Funders noted, “In larger urban environments, you have the luxury of more people moving through your industry. The population in rural areas is not growing as quickly”—so there is a greater need to find ways to train and support the workers who are available. Participants offered the following advice for bringing employers to the table:

- Formally include employer representatives in the structure of the collaborative.
- Invite employers to help identify root causes of community problems and include them in the design and implementation of solutions.
- These relationships are a marathon, not a sprint; pace your requests for employer time and input accordingly.
- Ask employers for feedback on local graduates’ performance in the workplace. In what ways are graduates excelling? What skills and knowledge gaps do employers see?
- Be aware that industry and education may “speak different languages;” you may need to tap an intermediary partner to help “translate” between the two sides to ensure everyone understands each other.



“Bring your employers in from the beginning and keep them engaged every step of the way.”

Amy Hall,
Workforce Solutions of West Central Texas

Key Practice 3: Dig into the Data

The rural leaders who participated in the convening couldn't talk long about their work without discussing data—why they needed it, where they found it, and how they used it.

KNOW YOUR “WHY”

Participants emphasized the importance of setting a purpose for data collection and analysis.

- Although data is required for compliance and accountability purposes, it is most powerful when used to understand students' strengths and needs and to improve programming.
- In an education collaborative, multiple parties will need to share information with each other to fully understand students' trajectories and outcomes. Trust is essential to these data-sharing relationships. Leaders should take the time to explain the reasons for sharing data and clearly outline the intended uses.

*[Sharing data is like]
opening your blinds and
allowing your neighbors to
look in your windows.
That was a scary piece for
[our partners], but we are
all in this together, and we
are working together to
build each other up.”*

Becky Garlick, Blinn College

GET TO KNOW THE NUMBERS...

Texas rural education collaboratives use statistical information from a variety of sources—much of it available at no or low cost—to make decisions related to college and career programming. For example:

- [Regional labor market information provided by the Texas Workforce Commission](#) indicates what career pathways are most likely to be viable for students wishing to remain in their region after graduation. This can be triangulated with the state's [Career and Technical Education programs of study](#) and local community college offerings to determine which dual credit, CTE, or work-based learning opportunities to offer.
- Data on student demographics and outcomes available through the [Texas Education Agency](#), [Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board](#), and [National Student Clearinghouse](#) show how students are doing and where there may be inequities in the system. The data can also be used to identify “bright spots”—districts, schools, or programs that are outperforming similar peers—so their effective practices can be shared.

Key Practice 3: Dig into the Data

... AND REMEMBER THERE IS MORE TO DATA THAN NUMBERS.

As important as quantitative data is, it can never tell the whole story. Convening participants reported using a variety of strategies to gather rich qualitative data, including:

- Surveying students to understand what career paths most interest them.
- Interviewing business leaders to understand the context surrounding regional labor market data and confirm which career pathways would be most beneficial to offer students.
- Conducting discussion groups with employers to gather feedback on graduates' performance in the workplace and identify opportunities to improve high school curriculum.
- Inviting school personnel to share student stories to explain trends seen in outcomes data.
- Asking partners to help establish connections with students who have dropped out of school.

[Rural educators] have a name and a story to every single one of [their] kids.”

Maria Luna Torres,
Rural Student Success Initiative



Key Practice 4: Plan for Sustainability

College and career readiness programming is resource-intensive in its own right; running a collaborative to deliver that programming requires time and effort, too. It's essential to plan for fiscal sustainability from the outset of a partnership.

KNOW WHAT'S AVAILABLE

While no financing strategy is risk-free, participants reported that the following public funding streams were helpful resources for expanding college and career opportunities for students:

- The more students who receive federal and state financial aid, the lighter the burden on communities to help students finance college. Systematically increasing the number of students who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a fundamental strategy used by several of the partnerships represented at the convening. Recent Texas legislation making FAFSA completion a requirement for high school graduation will accelerate the trend.
- In Texas, the Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECH) grant program allows participating districts to receive funding for high school students to pursue industry certifications, level 1 or 2 certificates, or associate degrees for up to six years.
- The state's College, Career, and Military Readiness (CCMR) Outcomes Bonus, part of the K-12 finance reform package passed in 2019, allows districts to receive additional funding for every student

(above a state-determined threshold) who graduates having achieved one of the state's designated CCMR indicators; the bonus is larger for students in poverty or receiving special education services. At least 55% must be reinvested in CCMR programming for students in grades 8-12. **According to most recently available data, Texas districts are drawing down just 17% of the full potential of this funding stream.⁴**

- School districts received an influx of funding through American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER), intended to help schools address learning loss due to the COVID pandemic. Although these funds are temporary, they can be used to kick-start new college and career readiness strategies, which can be sustained in the long term through the CCMR Outcomes Bonus.



Key Practice 4: Plan for Sustainability

FOCUS ON THE BIG PICTURE

Participants emphasized that having the right mindset about funding was just as important as knowing where to find it:

- Every decision should be student-centered; the goal is not to generate more funding for its own sake, but to help students succeed. Participants cautioned against prioritizing low-cost, low-value credentials that will not serve students well in the labor market.
- Sometimes in order to make money, you have to spend money. Getting to a sustainable long-term funding strategy often requires investing time, attention, and resources in the short term.
- The current availability of additional funding for public education represents a unique opportunity to invest deeply in students. Instead of using the new revenue to supplant existing funds from other sources and continue business as usual, education leaders can pursue bold goals and break new ground.

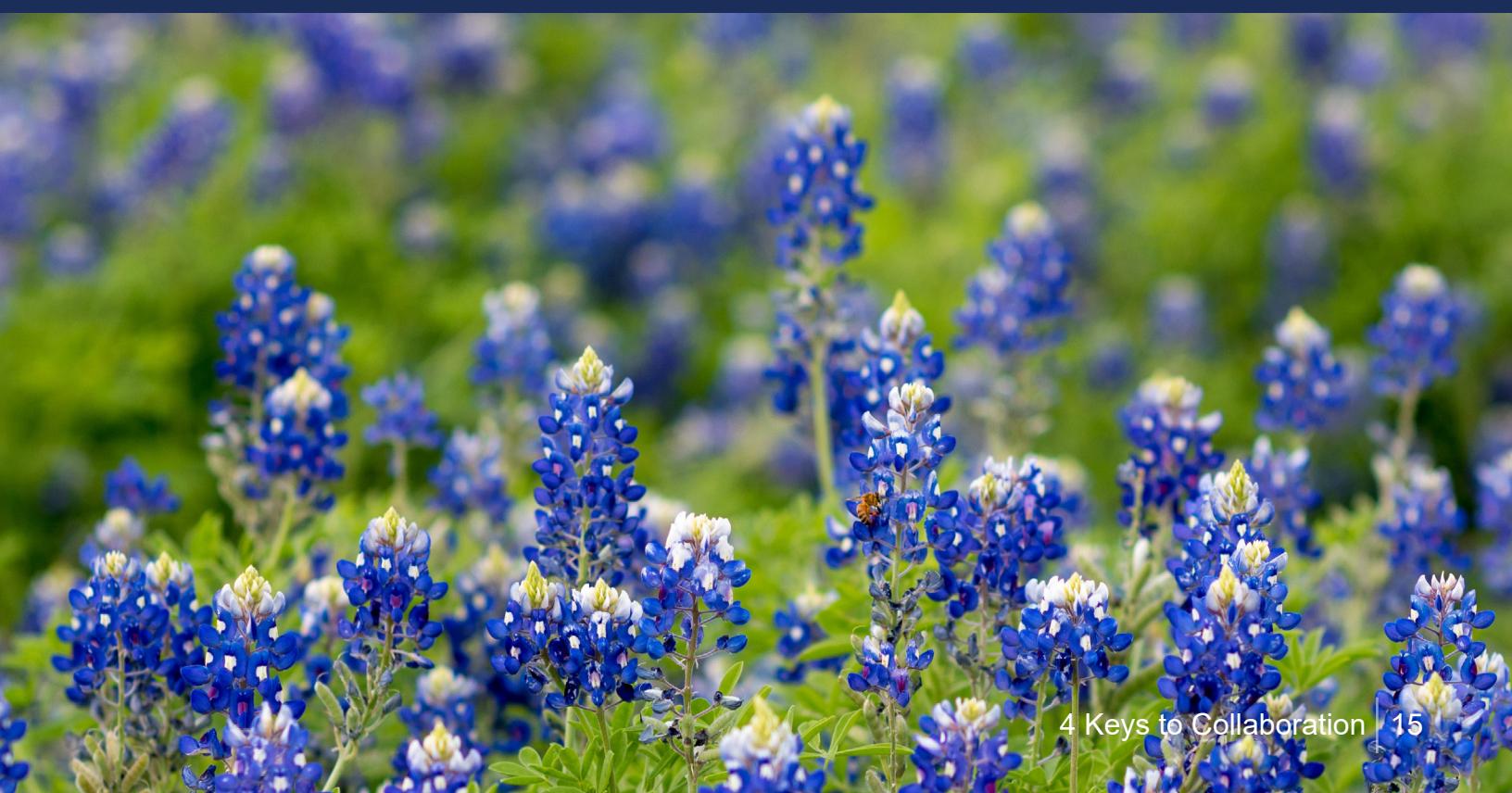


CONCLUSION

Sometimes it feels like the challenges facing our young people today are so complex and deep-rooted, they can't be solved.

We are grateful for the leadership of our colleagues in rural Texas who are tackling those challenges anyway. They're bringing together diverse community members to share information, pool resources, and work as a team to bring more opportunities to students. As a result, more young people in rural Texas are receiving high-quality college and career advising, pursuing ambitious goals knowing they have a network of support, and creating bright futures for themselves.

This kind of collaboration is hard, but it's not impossible—and we need a lot more of it. We hope that by sharing these insights and the accompanying **Guide to Rural Education Collaboratives in Texas**, we can advance this work across the state. **Because if rural Texas thrives, we all will.**





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