




July 2022

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Recommended Citation

Almond, Devon (2022) "American College Towns as a Road Map for Rural Community Colleges to Imprint Higher Education into Community," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 48: No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2334>

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American College Towns as a Road Map for Rural Community Colleges to Imprint Higher Education into Community

Devon Almond

This reflective article brings together two interrelated educational interests: rural community colleges and American college towns. More than a decade ago, while working across various rural community colleges in Northern Canada, I began to imagine how American college towns might offer a model to imprint higher education into rural places where there are few, if any, college campuses. Guided by this vision, I sought to identify the most common everyday characteristics found across American college towns in order to create a road map for rural community colleges to embed educational imprints into community. In what follows, I offer reflections around how these college town characteristics offer a potential road map for rural community colleges to structure educational imprints into the lifeblood of local towns. In addition to drawing on this multi-year research project that involved physically visiting 100 American college towns across 34 states, I also draw on campus visits to hundreds of rural community colleges and thousands of small towns across North America to offer ideas related to embedded cultures and rural ways of knowing. The article concludes with practical steps for rural community college administrators to embed educational imprints into rural places.

Systems and Cultures Anchored in Place

Both rural community colleges and American college towns represent higher education systems that are anchored in place. In rural community colleges, this commitment is reflected in a broad orienting organizational mission that involves the community development of collectives through the career development of individuals within designated geographical places (e.g., rural region). Organizational hallmarks of this place-based mission include open admission (i.e., a democratic theme), pathways to university degrees (i.e., an academic theme), and skills-based training for employment (i.e., an economic theme) (Rogers, 2010). As “neighborhood schools of higher education,” rural community colleges are close to home and both representative and inclusive of local communities (Rural Community College Alliance, 2021). Initially instilled across the United States to accommodate local G.I. Bill recipients and then significantly expanded a generation later (Cohen & Brawer, 2013), rural community colleges have offered longstanding significance to rural places. With these deeply anchored roots, rural community colleges continue to adapt to shape local communities. For instance, this evolution is evidenced through the role that community colleges fulfill in restoring local towns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (JFF Policy Leadership Trust, 2020). In short, community colleges commonly fulfill a vital role in shaping the systems and cultures within designated geographical places.

In American college towns, the commitment to designated geographical places is reflected in the way that local colleges are interwoven into local towns. As a distinctly American phenomenon, college towns represent “... any city where a college or university and the cultures it creates exert a dominant influence over the character of the community” (Gumprecht, 2009, p. 9).

Outside of the United States, higher education institutions are overwhelmingly located in urban centers, where the development of towns came before the development of colleges. However, in the United States, many colleges were developed before the town (Gumprecht, 2009). Gumprecht (2009) describes "... the most common explanation for why the United States has so many college towns has been the perception that college founders believed that a quiet, rural setting, away from the evils of city life, was the only proper environment for learning" (p. 12). Whereas higher education is significantly imprinted into the physical and subtle core of college towns, I have noticed that rural community college campuses are often physically situated on the outskirts of town. Consequently, the everyday cultural ecosystems in which higher education is positioned on the periphery of town means that the local people who might ultimately enroll at their hometown colleges are less likely to interact with the local college in everyday situations. Although this everyday contact may not matter for traditional students who are already identified with a cultural momentum of education (e.g., fast-tracking from high school, to college, to career), it is a very different reality for townsfolk whose primary cultural identity is already both well-established outside of higher education and already attached to the local place. Notably, this latter group represents the primary student group for rural community colleges.

Local People Anchored in Places

Rural community colleges overwhelmingly serve local people within designated geographical places. These students are largely non-traditional students who juggle competing commitments of parenting, working, and so on (Cohen & Brawer, 2013). While traditional students who are already identified first with their role inside of education (i.e., student) commonly leave their hometowns for college, non-traditional students who are already identified first with a role outside of education (i.e., parent, employee, community member, etc.) are more likely to already be deeply anchored in their hometowns. Indeed, numerous studies demonstrate how place attachment (e.g., family ties, closeness to nature, community qualities, etc.) shape the enrollment decisions of rural community college students (Moon Longhurst, 2017; Almond, 2014). It is these local people (i.e., potential students) who might most significantly be impacted by physically re-mapping educational imprints from the periphery of small towns, where rural community college campuses tend to be located, into the core of town.

Despite the often-significant impact of community-based relationships already facilitated by rural community colleges, many local people seem to externalize the local college. I expect this externalization is due in part to the invisibility of higher education in everyday cultural ecosystems. To demonstrate, when I interviewed non-traditional students across three rural community colleges in Northern Canada about factors that would support more local people to attend college, the message was very clear: local colleges need to be visible in everyday situations (Almond, 2014). This does not mean flashy billboards or imitating big city enrollment gimmicks. In Young's (2010) terms, rural community colleges, like mom-and-pop community businesses, are optimally localized through "town-based ideas about relationships, performance, and prudence" (p. 10). For rural community colleges, this means using "down-to earth language that down-to-earth community people can embrace" (Young, 2010, p. 8). This is important because in most rural places,

...the physical ways in which college manifests itself via large buildings, campus signs, athletic facilities, and students walking to and from class are often absent

from rural peoples' everyday lived experiences. In other words, rural students do not grow up seeing and experiencing college in their own towns. College is something that happens elsewhere, possibly in a place they have never visited. (Gillon, 2017, p. 17)

As such, rural community colleges are uniquely situated to physically and subtly embed educational imprints into the everyday lives of local people. As will be elaborated upon later, the everyday characteristics of American college towns offer a potential road map to structure these educational imprints into rural places. This road map is in service of building cultural ecosystems that visibly include higher education in the everyday lived experiences of local people in rural places.

Embedded Cultures of Rural Communities

The tendency for local people to grow into the everyday cultural ecosystems that surround them in personal and professional places points to the embedded cultures of everyday holding environments. Drawing on Brofenbrenner's (1989) ecological systems theory, along with the influential work of psychologists Winnicott (1965) and Kegan (1982), the embedded cultures of everyday holding environments incrementally shape rural people's ways of knowing and can either neutralize higher education aspirations (e.g., default-into-security) or nurture developmental growth (e.g., design-into-growth).¹ Decades ago, Maslow (1943) pointed to this perennial human tendency to gradually either default-into-security or design-into-growth. Applied to today's cultures, Pink (2009) identified the subtle element of *design* that grows beyond concrete *default* functions as an important capacity in 21st century ecosystems.² It is in these everyday containers of personal, family, school, and community ecosystems where the education trajectories of rural people are inherited, developed, and validated toward or away from growth. To default-into-security commonly means steering away from higher education.

Without a predisposition for higher education, local people simply do not enter into the searching and choosing phases of the college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Briefly, this seminal college choice model asserts that potential students' underlying aspirations for higher education are necessary entry points for considering college as an option. While urban and suburban holding environments include an abundance of educational imprints, the everyday holding environments in rural regions commonly include few, if any, of these place-based higher education influences. Indeed, the physical artifacts of these holding environments represent the materialization of deeper cultural layers, including norms, customs, habits, values, assumptions, beliefs, and expectations (Hall, 1976). Although the higher education aspirations of rural people are often viewed through the lens of lack (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Steel & Fahy, 2011), what I am pointing to is not a deficiency in the cultural ecosystems of rural regions. Rather, this

¹ Winnicott described holding environments as the supportive environments that therapists create for clients. The term comes from the maternal function of holding an infant to create a sense of trust and security. When considered metaphorically, holding environments refer to the broader role of care and growth in shaping the embedded cultures that subtly "hold" people.

² Pink's synthesis of human development theories includes three motivational drives: (1) Motivation 1.0 is about physical survival for basic needs of food and security; (2) Motivation 2.0 involves also responding to pain/punishments and pleasure/rewards; and (3) Motivation 3.0 is a drive to learn, create, and better the world.

distinction simply suggests that the embedded cultures of everyday holding environments in rural communities commonly supports defaulting-into-security more than designing-into-growth.

To demonstrate, consider the everyday holding environments of third-places. In *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*, Oldenburg (1999) describes how third-places informally bridge two dominant places: (1) personal places of home and (2) professional places of work/school. In third-places, such as coffee shops, bars, and community centers, local people can spend a few dollars and hang-out for hours. Whether through default or design, third-places create containers to facilitate conversation, build community, and perhaps also shape the direction of local people's everyday lived experiences. In doing so, third-places function as micro-containers or everyday holding environments for the larger, more encompassing macro-containers that weave together higher education and community. Through design, these otherwise neutral places seem to hold the latent capacity to embed educational imprints into community and gradually influence the education trajectories of local people (e.g., design-into-growth). However, through reflecting on visits to thousands of small towns across North America, I have observed that third-places in rural communities commonly promote the direction of defaulting-into-security through the physical artifacts in the everyday holding environments. For example, contrast the homespun décor of a roadside country café with a suburban Starbucks coffee shop complete with a bold mission painted on its walls: "To inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time" (Starbucks Coffee Company, 2022).

Rural Ways of Knowing

Rural ways of knowing are shaped by a sense of place. In this context, ways of knowing refers to how students perceive and understand themselves within their environments (Gurum, 2013). In an urban-centric everyday world, it is important to recognize how dominant knowledges are constructed at the expense of marginalizing localized, rural knowledges (Roberts, 2014). For rural students, going to college is often experienced in very different ways compared to students from environments where higher education is already embedded into the everyday cultural ecosystems—that is, where going to college is normal (Almond, 2014). I can personally and professionally relate to these experiences. Raised near a small town in Saskatchewan on the Canadian prairies, I noticed that townspeople and country folk alike simply did not talk about college. Instead, local people talked about farming, oil and gas, the town's co-op, and local hockey teams. Similarly, when I looked around my hometown, I noticed that local people donned clothing and drove vehicles that reflected these dominant local industries and sporting endeavors. Higher education was not part of our everyday cultural ecosystem. Rather, we knew ourselves in relation to the people, places, and jobs with which we were already familiar. This cultural ecosystem of gravitating towards the known exemplifies defaulting-into-security.

After struggling through high school, I enrolled at the local community college, where an unflinching interest in the country road to college was initially sparked. As Gillon (2017) observed, limited attention is offered to the higher education "... structures and systems that have created environments in which rural people, places, and communities attempt to exist in an urban-centric society" (Gillon, p. 13). In the coming decades, I started to formulate ideas about

how rural ways of knowing applied to the higher education aspirations of local people. In addition to driving to hundreds of rural community colleges across North America, I worked at numerous small-town colleges and universities in Canada and in the United States. One assignment was especially influential in shaping this thinking around rural ways of knowing. At the time, I was a faculty member tasked with building learning communities in an oil camp in a geographically remote region of Northern Canada. I quickly realized that the educational aspirations of most camp residents reflected the very concrete ways of knowing of industrial age societies, which starkly contrasted the highly subtle information age ways of knowing that anchor more urban colleges and universities. As synthesized by Beck and Cowan (1996), the trajectory from hunter-gatherer, to agricultural, to industrial age, to information age societies and beyond point to increasingly subtle ways of knowing that are less attached to a sense of place.

To suggest that rural ways of knowing are rooted in place illuminates how considerations related to place are commonly overlooked in urban-centric educational frameworks. Recognizing the hardy vitality associated with these rural ways of knowing, I began to imagine a research-based model to physically implant educational imprints into the everyday cultural ecosystem of small towns where there are few, if any, place-based higher education institutions. The specific inspiration for research on college towns was catalyzed when I meandered into the college town of Arcata, California. It was there where I noticed that the local college, Humboldt State University, was physically integrated into the everyday cultural ecosystem of the town. Since the embedded cultures of everyday holding environments appear to be influential in shaping the cultural identities and education trajectories of local people, I immediately became enthralled with the all-pervading cultures of college towns to positively shape the education trajectories of local people in rural places. As such, I began to imagine how college towns could serve as a design-into-growth model that rural community colleges could apply to themselves in an effort to shape the education trajectories of local people.

Everyday Characteristics of American College Towns

The everyday cultural ecosystems of American college towns tend to be anchored by higher education and supported by local people already familiar with college. This commonly creates everyday holding environments in which higher education is interwoven into place (i.e., *collegetownness*). Recognizing that rural community colleges are typically located in regions that are centered around heavy industries and local people who are less familiar with college, I sought to identify the most common everyday characteristics found across American college towns as a model to instill collegetownness into rural places where there are few, if any, college campuses. Guided by a singular research question: “How is the college visibly represented in the town?” this multi-year research project involved physically visiting 100 American college towns across 34 states (Almond, 2020). Drawing on Gumprecht’s (2009) research on American college towns, I applied this researcher’s basic identification of college towns as places where college students represent 20% or more of the town’s population.³ Further drawing on Gumprecht (2009), my

³ Using this quantitative threshold, Gumprecht identified 305 college towns across the United States. In addition to physically visiting 100 of 305 (33%) of the college towns identified by Gumprecht, I also traveled to various college-influenced towns that had a strong, visible college presence in the town but did not meet the 20% threshold. For more details, see Almond (2020). I was especially interested in smaller college towns.

study focused on two areas where collegetownness is generally most visible in college towns: (1) near campus and (2) downtown.

It is these everyday characteristics commonly found across American college towns that offer a potential road map for rural community colleges to physically structure educational imprints into the lifeblood of local towns.

Table 1

Everyday Characteristics of American College Towns

<p>Foundational Characteristics:</p> <p>1. <i>College Colors</i> – college colors are embedded throughout the local town.</p> <p>2. <i>College Language</i> – college-affirming language, college athletics language, and college colors language are featured throughout the local town.</p>
<p>Private Sector Characteristics (Place):</p> <p>3. <i>Local Organizations</i> (Exterior) – college athletics stickers, college merchandise, other college artifacts, and other college stickers are featured on the exterior of local organizations.</p> <p>4. <i>Local Organizations</i> (Interior) – third-places (e.g., coffee shops, bars), college apparel merchandisers, and other organizations feature college-related items on the interior of the organization.</p>
<p>Public Sector Characteristics (Place):</p> <p>5. <i>Public Signage</i> – town welcome signs, distinct directional signs, and distinct street signs relate to the local college.</p> <p>6. <i>Public Artifacts</i> – street banners, street paintings, statues, and water towers in the local town relate to the local college.</p> <p>7. <i>Public Transportation</i> – specialty license plates and local transit relate to the local college.</p>
<p>Local People’s Characteristics (People):</p> <p>8. <i>Local People’s Vehicles</i> – window stickers, bumper stickers, and license plate holders on local people’s vehicles feature the college.</p> <p>9. <i>Local People’s Clothing</i> – local people’s clothing relates to the local college.</p>
<p>Integrative Characteristic (Professions):</p> <p>10. <i>Touch Points</i> – town-based college shops and town-based welcome centers feature the local college.</p>

Adapted from Almond (2020, p. 271).

Rural community college administrators can apply the everyday characteristics of college towns to embed educational imprints into local towns. This is to say that rural community colleges can utilize the richness of existing community-based relationships to imprint higher education physically and subtly into the everyday lived experiences of local people. In what follows, I offer specific examples of a few college town characteristics and practical steps for rural community colleges to apply the characteristics within local towns.

1. **Develop a Guiding Coalition:** Colleges and towns can develop a guiding coalition that collaboratively navigates through each of the characteristics to identify *win-win-win* situations that benefit the college, the town, and the larger cultural ecosystem. Including interested stakeholders from local governments is especially appropriate because both

rural colleges and towns often lack resources (Andrigo, 2019). Other participants can come from across the rural community college. To demonstrate, in a research consulting role with a rural community college in Northern Canada, I initiated a “College Town Leadership Group” that consisted of around a dozen college employees, students, and alumni who were dedicated to embedding the college town characteristics in the town. These self-appointed volunteers initially committed to participate in 10 facilitated conversations related to structuring the local college into the lifeblood of the local town. Guided by Kotter’s (2012) organizational change process, the group catalyzed significant energies through the initial 10 conversations, which fostered the college to generate external funds to further advance the project. Key elements of Kotter’s model include establishing a sense of urgency, developing a guiding coalition, articulating and communicating a vision, instilling *quick-wins*, and sustaining the momentum to institutionalize the change.

2. **Begin with the Foundational Characteristics:** Having established a guiding coalition with guiding agreements (e.g., *win-win-win* for the college, the town, and the larger cultural ecosystem), the coalition is wise to begin with the Foundational Characteristics and then progress through each of the additional characteristics. As described in Almond (2020), I found that when the Foundational Characteristics were included in the cultural ecosystem of the college town, the additional characteristics were also commonly included in the town’s ecosystem; however, when the foundational characteristics were not visible in this larger cultural ecosystem, the additional characteristics were also absent. Consequently, the guiding coalition can begin to look for ways to imprint college colors and college language across the town. To illustrate college language, briefly consider the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, which is situated in the town of College, Alaska. Located at the intersection of College Road, University Avenue, and Alumni Drive is the College Mall with businesses, such as College Coffee and College Town Pizzeria. Guiding coalitions are wise to work closely with athletics, alumni, and college-related associations to amplify the college in the town. This is because a thread that runs through the research findings is that the everyday characteristics of college towns are typically facilitated through *athletics* (e.g., college athletics programs), *alumni* (e.g., college alumni programs), and *associations* (e.g., college student organizations) (Almond, 2020).
3. **Progress to Private Sector Characteristics:** Imprinting private sector characteristics involves engaging local businesses to identify *win-win-win* opportunities to include physical artifacts related to higher education in these organizations. For instance, a potentially impactful *quick-win* for the guiding coalition could be to collaborate with local third-places to display athletics memorabilia. In addition to commonly observing this characteristic at coffee shops and bars across the nation, I most memorably observed hundreds of pieces of Oregon State University Beaver memorabilia across the walls of the Orange O Barber Salon in Corvallis, Oregon. This business, which was named after the college colors of the hometown Oregon State University Beavers, resembled a blend of a collegiate athletics museum and the basement memorabilia collection of a sports fanatic. Related to this, the guiding coalition could also identify and encourage main street businesses to merchandise college items, such as I observed in college towns from

Alaska to Florida, and from Maine to California. Another *quick-win* recommendation is to implement an “Alum Works Here” storefront window sticker program, such as I first observed in downtown Cheney, Washington, home of Eastern Washington University (Almond, 2020).

4. **Collaborate on Public Sector Characteristics:** These characteristics, encompassing public signage, public artifacts, and public transportation necessitate especially close collaboration between rural community colleges and local governments. For example, a *quick-win* could be for the guiding coalition to collaborate with local governments to include the college’s name on the town’s welcome sign. A couple of memorable examples from my research include the rural frontier town of Barbourville, Kentucky, where the town welcome sign featured a silhouette of pioneer Daniel Boone, along with the text “Entering First Frontier” and “Home of Union College.” Another memorable welcome sign was in Northfield, Minnesota, home of St. Olaf and Carleton Colleges; this welcome sign, which stated “Colleges, cows, and contentment,” brilliantly illuminated the quality-of-life impacts of higher education in rural places. Similarly, the guiding coalition could identify opportunities to include the college’s logo on directional signs and street signs. In stark contrast to standard green roadside signage, these street signs related directly to the college, tended to be in college colors, and often included a college logo. A notable example was found in the downtown region in Laramie, Wyoming, home of the University of Wyoming Cowboys, in which the distinct brown-and-gold street signage featured the UW Cowboys logo. Finally, a *quick-win* example of public artifacts is to feature a statue of the college’s athletics mascot in the town as I first observed with the Washington State University Cougar in Pullman, Washington (Almond, 2020).
5. **Systematize Local People’s Characteristics:** In many college towns, a tipping point is reached when a critical mass of local people adopt college colors. This particular characteristic, which is demonstrated by the vehicle accessories (e.g., window stickers, bumper stickers, and license plate holders) that people voluntarily place on their vehicles, along with the clothes that people voluntarily wear, is overwhelmingly observed in college towns with highly visible athletics programs. This characteristic is particularly evident for “Game Day” events. For instance, I was in Iowa City, Iowa, when the University of Iowa Hawkeyes competed for the 2016 Rose Bowl. Walking the streets near campus, I estimated that 30-40% of people were wearing Hawkeye yellow-and-black (Almond, 2020). In my current hometown of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, which is home of the University of North Carolina, local people commonly wear UNC Tar Heels clothing. Reflective of many college towns across the nation, these collegiate items can be widely purchased at in-town businesses. Consequently, guiding coalitions are wise to build systems to readily distribute college clothing and vehicle accessories to students, alumni, and employees at-cost and as graduation gifts.
6. **Identify an Integrative Characteristic:** Integrative in nature, the net effect of visibly imprinting the college in the town is to amplify the place-based mission of rural community colleges in the everyday lived experiences of local people. A practical step for the guiding coalition could be to identify neutral places in the town where a college presence would generate value for the college, the town, and the larger cultural

ecosystem. Examples include town-based college shops and town-based welcome centers that include the local college. Welcome centers offer a particularly interesting example of an integrative college touching point in the town. A memorable example is the visitors' center in Lawrence, Kansas that featured a colorful University of Kansas Jayhawk statue outside of the visitors' center, along with UK billboards inside the center (Almond, 2020).

Conclusion

Both rural community colleges and American college towns represent higher education systems that are anchored in place. For rural community colleges, this place-based commitment is reflected in an organizational mission dedicated to serving local people in designated geographical locations (e.g., rural region). These local students are largely non-traditional students who juggle competing commitments of parenting, working, and so on. Commonly attached to place, it is these local people who might be most significantly impacted by physically re-mapping educational imprints from the periphery of small towns, where rural community college campuses tend to be located, into the core of town.

In American college towns, the commitment to designated geographical places is reflected in the way that local colleges are interwoven into local towns. College towns offer a potential road map to embed educational imprints into rural regions where there are few, if any, place-based higher education institutions. This road map is in service of building cultural ecosystems that visibly include higher education in the everyday lived experiences of local people in rural places. It is in these everyday containers of personal, family, school, and community ecosystems where the education trajectories of rural people are inherited, developed, and validated toward or away from growth.

In offering a potential road map for rural community colleges to structure educational imprints into the lifeblood of local towns, the embedded cultures of college towns are illustrated as a means to positively shape the education trajectories of local people. Rural community college administrators can support the integration of everyday characteristics of college towns into local towns by implementing the aforementioned practical steps. The net effect could be creating the conditions for the community development of collectives through the career development of individuals.

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