

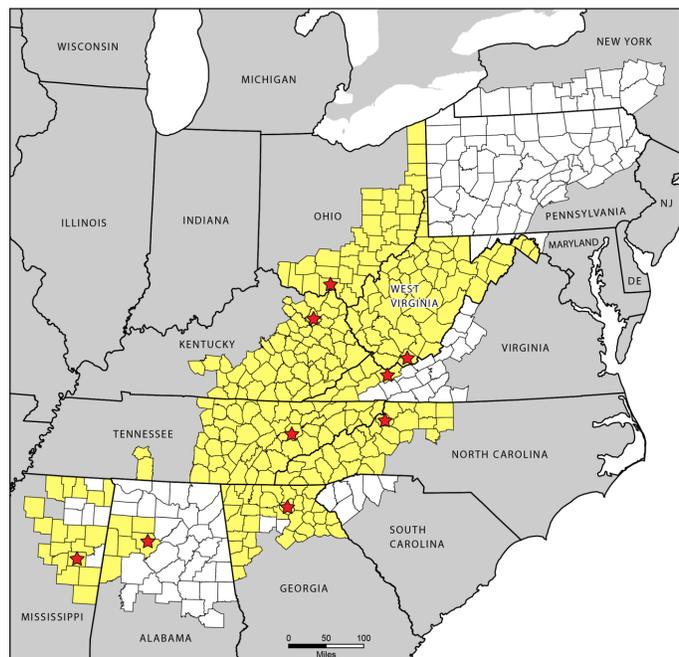
Appalachian Higher Education Initiative Planning Workshop Summary Increasing Postsecondary Education Attainment—The “Game Changer” for Appalachia July 2012

*“The [Appalachian] Region is one of great beauty and a wealth of resources ... burdened with pockets of poverty and privation.” **

The Appalachian Higher Education (AHE) Initiative, in operation since 1998, aims to increase the Appalachian Region’s college-going rate, defined as participation in any postsecondary education or in the military by the fall following graduation from high school. The Initiative is a collection of centers in nine Appalachian states that provides technical assistance, training, and financial support to high schools; a network of mentors supports the centers. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) has invested over \$10 million on the Initiative since its inception, and AHE centers have worked with over 386,000 high school students in 255 high schools, achieving significant improvement in the college-going rates in underserved rural communities.

On July 24 and 25, 2012, ARC held a planning workshop to conduct a strategic review of the Initiative, inviting federal, state, and local leaders in the fields of education and economic development to formulate recommendations to the Commission regarding future activities. The group made three recommendations:

- Continue the AHE centers as an initiative of ARC; give the Initiative higher priority; and strive to engage and get support from all 13 Appalachian states.
- Maintain the AHE Network; enhance the scope of the services provided to include direct assistance in and an emphasis on fundraising.
- Establish the AHE Network as a more formal organizational entity: a stand-alone 501(c)3 organization or a center in an existing organization.



AHE Center Locations and Service Areas

This report documents the workshop discussions and the recommendations made for the consideration of the Commission.

* Tim Ezzell, Dayton Lambert, and Eric Ogle, “Strategies for Economic Improvement in Appalachia’s Distressed Counties,” http://www.arc.gov/assets/research_reports/StrategiesforEconomicImprovement-Contents-ExecSummary.pdf (February 2012).

Background

Appalachia has come a long way in the past four decades. Mirroring national trends, Appalachia’s economy has diversified, and the poverty rate has been reduced (from 33 percent in 1965 to 18 percent in 2008). The Region’s economy, however, tends to improve less than the nation’s in good times and to fall further behind in bad times. Recent economic data confirm that Appalachia has fared far worse in the current recession than the rest of the nation. As in the nation overall, education and training are driving forces behind Appalachia's economic growth and diversification.

Even if they graduate from high school, rural students are less likely than their urban and suburban counterparts to enroll in college. The national college-going rate is 70 percent; in Appalachia, the rate is estimated to be about 50 percent, and is substantially lower in some areas. As with the economic data, educational gains in the Region mirror national trends, though not at the same rate of increase. Thus, while both the nation and the Appalachian Region have seen dramatic increases in college-going rates and degree attainment, the size of the gap between the nation and the Region is larger today than it was 20 years ago, and the ensuing economic gap is a direct reflection of the education discrepancies.

Rural students face major challenges in preparing for and going to college. In West Virginia, out of a cohort of 100 students in the 9th grade, 73 graduate from high school, 39 go on to college, but only 16 complete college in a four-year period of time. Less than one-half of the students in rural America meet ACT’s college readiness standards.

In regions with a high poverty rate, funding for higher education is a major barrier to access—both actual and perceived. As much of the available financial aid is based on merit and not financial need, low-income and disadvantaged students often do not receive the funds needed for college. And even when funds are available, many students and their families greatly overestimate the cost of attending college and choose not to apply. Compounding these issues, in some rural areas, going to college is seen as a reason and a way to leave a community, rather than as a strategy to return and contribute. This is contrary to the place-based nature of rural cultures in general and the Appalachian cultures in particular. Improving college access for rural students is one of the Obama Administration’s priority strategies, and is a significant goal of ARC.



“During the period of 1975 through 2010, the immediate [nationwide] college enrollment rate ranged from a low of 49 percent to a high of 70 percent. Specifically, this rate increased from 1975 to 1997 (51 to 67 percent), declined from 1997 to 2001 (to 62 percent), then increased from 2001 to 2009 (to 70 percent).”

Condition of Education 2012, Immediate Transition to College (Indicator 34-2012), U.S. Department of Education



The Appalachian Higher Education Initiative

In 1998, modeling after the successful Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education, “OACHE,” the ARC began developing and supporting what has evolved into the [Appalachian Higher Education \(AHE\) Network](#)—nine state-based centers working with high schools and a limited number of middle schools to increase the college-going rate in Appalachia. AHE centers provide technical assistance and frequently make small grants to schools in their self-defined service areas. Grants ranging from \$2,000 to \$10,000 are awarded to eligible high schools through a competitive RFP process. With AHE center assistance, participating schools implement low-cost, high-impact activities and services that research has shown (and the results of the AHE Initiative confirm) encourage and promote participation in postsecondary education.

The “model program” offered through the AHE centers is typically the first step. The model program is a specific set of core concepts and strategies that include college and worksite visits, career fairs, parent engagement, financial aid training, occupational interest surveys, curriculum alignment discussions between high school and college faculty, researching and discussing various postsecondary options, and an exploration of non-degree professions. Many of the activities focus on changing the school culture by changing the mindsets of the teachers and administrators with regard to the students they serve: All students are to be prepared to succeed in postsecondary education. The centers work with all students, as opposed to only working with and serving a select group of students.

The AHE Network supports the start-up of new centers and staff as well as the ongoing development of existing ones. Network mentors provide technical assistance and training in three areas: program implementation and operations; leadership and organizational development; and sustainability, including fundraising techniques and strategies. Network mentors design and lead three meetings per year for all center directors and key staff to stimulate peer learning and collaboration; conduct site visits at state centers and their partnering schools and communities; and organize an annual tour of mature implementation sites for center directors, staff, and their partnering schools and communities.

QUICK DATA FISCAL YEARS 2005–2010	
Total number of students served	316,701
Total number of seniors/graduates served	64,321
Total number going to college or military	35,429
Overall college-going rate	55%
Impact—<i>additional</i> students continuing their education	2,957
Total ARC funding FY 2005–2010	\$5,264,352
Cost per <i>additional</i> student continuing education	\$1,781

AHE 2012 Strategic Program Review

On July 24–25, 2012, ARC held a planning workshop to conduct a strategic review of the AHE Initiative and to formulate recommendations to the Commission on the future of the Initiative and central office funding. To guide and focus the discussion, workshop participants were presented with three questions:

- Should AHE centers continue operating as an initiative of ARC?
- If AHE centers are to continue as an initiative of ARC, should the AHE Network be maintained?
- If AHE centers and/or the AHE Network are to be maintained, what level of ARC central office support should be provided?

These questions were not addressed sequentially. Instead, they were used as a framework within and around which participants could organize the information presented. At the end of the workshop, the questions were used to shape the nature of the recommendations that were made and to help ensure that the recommendations would be actionable.

Workshop participants included ARC officials from Washington, D.C., as well as representatives from four states (three of which have AHE centers); representatives from the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Education; AHE center directors, board members, and a partnering community leader; AHE Network mentors; individuals with expertise in rural education, economic development, and community engagement; and those with expertise in college access and success, systems change, and data collection and usage. A complete list of participants is provided on page 10.

The diversity of the participants' expertise and experience stimulated a robust discussion about the AHE Initiative—its operations and its accomplishments. The discussions focused on the need for the Initiative in the Appalachian Region and on what it would take to improve and expand the Initiative.

Participants' Views

Workshop participants identified the most important aspects of the Initiative, contrasted the AHE Initiative with other college-going and college-access programs, and commented on its outcomes. They also identified some of the program's strengths and needs and discussed future directions the program should take. Their perspectives touched on the value of giving students hope for a better future, making an effort to change school culture, using locally driven, school-by-school education change efforts that engage the community, and the importance of completing postsecondary education. Comments over the two days of meetings included the following:

AHE Program Elements

- Serves all students; understands that promoting college-going is a persistent task that keeps pressure on the school and the student; is a strategy to change school and community minds about the need for and the possibility of postsecondary education for all.
- Gives students hope. When students have hope, they can dream. When students dream, they have a reason to come to school. When students come to school, they can learn and teachers can teach.
- Provides a vision of a different future for a young person; provides a format for community partnerships; and may help overcome a lack of mentoring at home.
- Provides potential life-changing opportunities for kids in the Appalachian Region; a chance to use the daily job to help improve economic chances for a community.
- Supports and applies research findings about the impact of social and cultural influences on the college decision, as well as the impact of parents' experiences with college and access to college.
- Creates local partnerships that are student- and community-focused; respects and capitalizes on local diversity and cultural values; can be replicated and has scale-up potential.
- Establishes evidence of what works in improving college enrollment rates, creates ways to replicate what works, and replicates the program across the Appalachian Region.
- Helps schools create a college-going culture and make college-going a priority; shows kids that they belong, that they “fit,” in postsecondary education; serves as a stimulus or springboard for schools to leverage college access and success resources.
- Works with school personnel to implement changes to college-access activities in the school; changes the mind set—the old ways don't work; gets all school personnel on board; promotes community involvement and has a positive impact.
- The basic program is simple and low cost; the model is effective and works.

AHE Program Impacts

- Promotes total school buy-in, and changes the school culture concerning college access. Staff members are moved from “gate keepers” to “believers” realizing

that all students have potential and must be prepared to undertake some form of postsecondary education.

- Makes the work personal and meaningful on a school-by-school basis. Educational outcomes are not changed using a clinical trial approach with focus on one group or one intervention. Rather, changes are made working with all students using multiple interventions simultaneously.
- Helps schools begin to see where they really are with regard to serving students and not what is reported to them as “autopsy data” only after the students have graduated and moved on. Schools begin to see they can change outcomes.
- Has a positive impact on students, providing encouragement and mentoring; positive impact on community and schools, can be a game changer for Appalachian communities.
- Works with students and gets them to continue postsecondary education.

Needs and Future Directions

- Private-sector involvement is mutually beneficial for both implementation and sustainability. [Southwire’s 12 for Life](#) program in Georgia is an excellent example of a “win-win” partnership; going forward, the Georgia Appalachian Center for Higher Education will be a partner.
- Completion of certificates and degrees, and the employment rates of participating high school students, need to be measured and assessed. The centers are currently developing and will implement strategies to track college-completion rates for the students they serve; tracking employment will remain an issue.
- Raising funds is essential to long-term sustainability; fundraising is a different skill set than that needed to operate a center; additional staff is needed both for the Network and each center to assist with this.
- Centers need to enhance their internal capacities; critical components include a director and a development program; leveraging rather than layering other programmatic efforts is essential.



“An ideal year for a center would be to have [enough] capacity to have a full-time coordinator, to recruit, to send out RFPs, to do technical training with schools, and to have a person in development to build sustainability.”

Sarita Rhonemus, WVACHE center director
and AHE Network mentor



- The AHE program should be a higher priority; we need to get people in communities to see education as more valuable than it was the year before; education is key to boosting communities.

Workshop Participants' Recommendations to the Commission

Should the AHE centers continue operating as an initiative of ARC?

The answer to this question was a resounding yes. The participants felt strongly that ARC should continue to invest in the Initiative. They suggested that the Initiative become a higher priority at ARC, as well as with its state partners. Further, it was suggested that efforts be made to engage all 13 states in the Region. The ARC brand on the Initiative was viewed as critical because it gives the centers instant credibility with stakeholders in the Region.

It was also suggested that the Initiative needed to establish more specific goals and results beyond increasing college-going rates, perhaps on a tailored, state-by-state basis. To make replication easier, there was a perceived need to establish a strong Initiative brand in order to market the program; and to develop an AHE Initiative “playbook” and put it online, accessible from each center’s Web site. Other specific suggestions included documenting the Initiative’s achievements by putting a face on the students helped by the Initiative (telling their stories) and disseminating via social media, and creating a business plan for each center.

If the AHE centers are to continue, should the AHE Network be maintained?

Yes, the AHE Network should be maintained. The program support it provides was viewed as critical to the Initiative’s success. However, to strengthen and expand the Initiative, the Network needs to become a stronger, more formal organizational entity. The participants suggested that consideration be given to establishing the Network as an independent, 501(c)3 organization, but no specific recommendation to this effect was offered.

Expanding and strengthening the AHE Initiative will require a different skill set and a refined, more-targeted focus. The Network would be charged with:

1. Ongoing training and technical assistance to ensure continued improvement in current programs and practices as well as the adoption of additional demonstrated effective practices.
2. Helping more directly with fundraising, which would be a priority, while continuing to build the capacity of the individual centers to do more of this on their own. Network mentors need to provide hands-on support with on-the-ground fundraising (e.g., writing proposals), identifying and engaging local partners, and working on long-term center sustainability.

If the AHE centers and/or the AHE Network are to be maintained, what level of ARC central office support should be provided?

The participants were in agreement that the funding strategies for the AHE Initiative must be redesigned and that ARC central funding for the Network needs to be increased. It was suggested that developing a sustainable system of support for the Initiative required a collaborative fundraising strategy:

- Each center needs adequate funding to support both staff and grants to schools; in addition to a full-time director and program staff, centers need a staff member or a consultant to help with development and fundraising, with a focus at local and state sources, and with engaging the private sector.
- Network support needs to focus on national and regional grants and other resources, including those from the federal government, larger foundations, and major corporations.



“... is the problem money or leadership?”

Earl Gohl, ARC Federal Co-Chair

“Money; the demand for the program far outstrips the resources.”

AHE center directors and others
at the planning workshop



The centers also need boards of directors composed of individuals who are willing and able to assist with fundraising and partnership development at the state and local level.

Community foundations are an untapped local resource, one more likely to respond to fundraising approaches made by local individuals in support of local initiatives.

Next Steps

This report will be distributed to the members of the Commission for their consideration when developing the ARC budget and discussing policy. State ARC program managers and local development district directors and their staffs will be given copies for their reference, and to assist with development of new, or enhancing current, programs. The public will have access to this summary and recommendations of the planning workshop via [the ARC Web site](#).

Center directors, Network mentors, and the ARC project coordinator will review the recommendations of the panel and use them to guide and shape the further development of the centers and the Network. While some centers had already begun tracking students beyond high school and into college, not all have or have had that capacity. Centers that have received funding since the planning workshop have already started incorporating the recommendations. They have begun developing plans and mechanisms to continue monitoring student educational attainment beyond high school; and they are enhancing their capacity to better serve their region while increasing financial and other support by having staff focused on fundraising and stability.

For more information on the Initiative or individual centers, contact Jeff Schwartz, ARC Education Program Manager, or the center directors or Network mentors. A listing of all centers and mentors, with contact information, is provided on page 11.

Appalachian Regional Commission

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Appalachian Regional Commission

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