OPENING DOORS, CHANGING FUTURES


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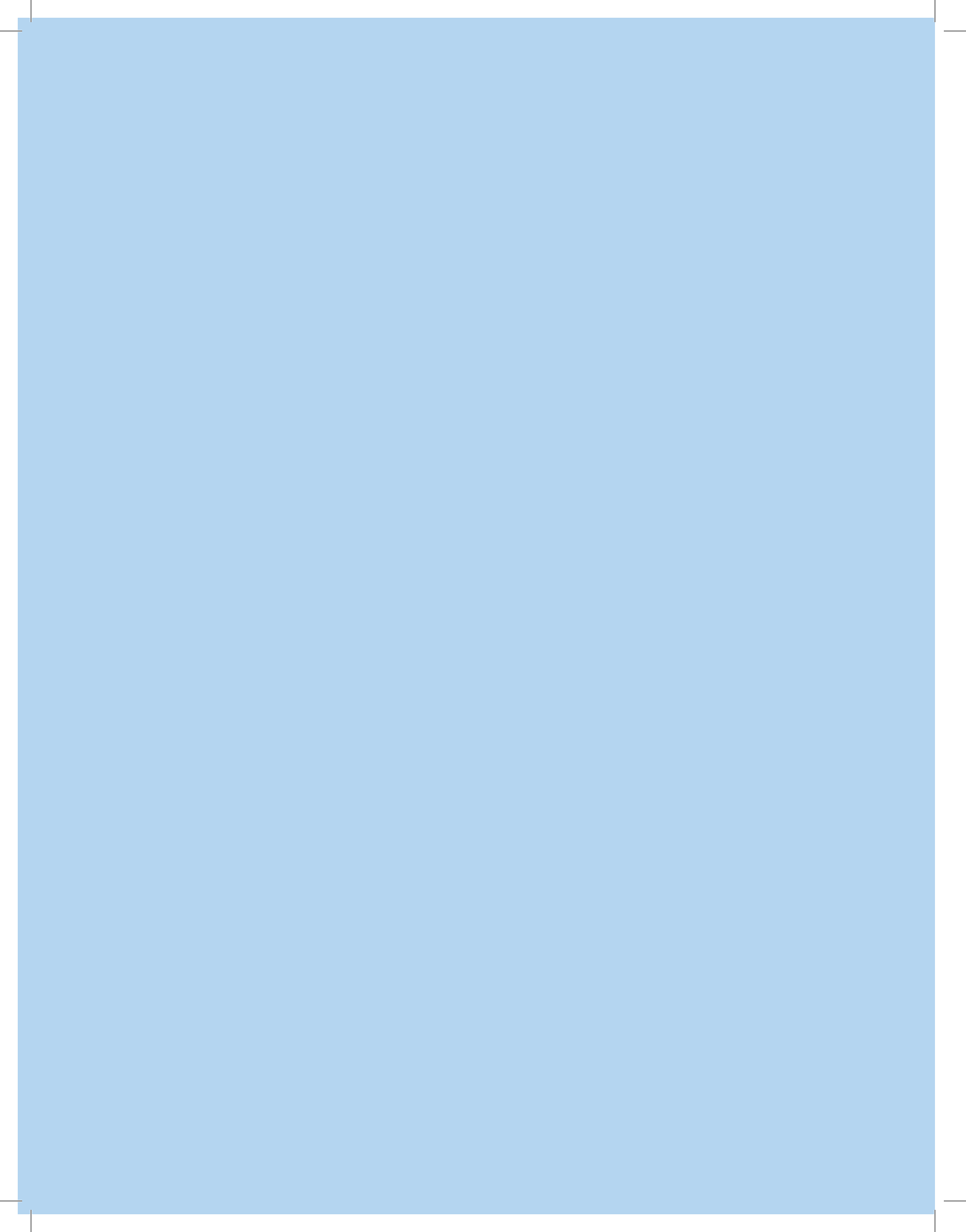
OPENING DOORS, CHANGING FUTURES

The Appalachian Higher Education Network, 2011–2016

Elizabeth L. Hale

with Dr. Helen Janc Malone and Sarah McCann

ABSTRACT

Opening Doors, Changing Futures tells the story of the collective impact the Appalachian Higher Education (AHE) Network had on postsecondary education attainment in 10 of the 13 states in Appalachia during school years 2011–2016. It depicts the current economic and education contexts in the region and highlights why increased post-high school education and training attainment is so important to the region and its current and future workforce. Program data and personal narratives emphasize how the AHE Network is investing in Appalachia's future by providing a range of services and partnering with families, institutions, and communities to increase postsecondary education access, success, and attainment. The report offers strategic actions that, if taken, will enable these stakeholder groups to provide even greater support to students. *Opening Doors, Changing Futures* concludes with two important messages: it takes collective efforts and collaborative actions among all stakeholders to prepare students to take advantage of and succeed in postsecondary education, and it takes time. The report is designed to motivate readers to leverage their partnerships and step-up their efforts to increase postsecondary education opportunity and attainment in Appalachia. The AHE Network is an initiative created and supported by the Appalachian Regional Commission and managed by the Institute for Educational Leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

"Appalachia's current high school graduation rate of 85.5% is within 1.2 percentage points of the nationwide rate of 86.7%." But the postsecondary education attainment rates of its workforce—persons age 25-64—are troublesome (Pollard and Jacobsen 2017).

Noted Kentucky author and journalist, Silas House, offers an insight into Appalachian culture when he says, "We take words seriously in Appalachia. We have a reverence for language and storytelling. The thing, always, is the story" (May 2015).

In the spirit of that cultural knowledge, this report—*Opening Doors, Changing Futures*—is a story about the accomplishments of the Appalachian Regional Commission's (ARC) postsecondary education initiative—the Appalachian Higher Education Network (AHE Network) during school years 2011–2016.

The AHE Network is a collection of Centers in ten states—Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia—working with high schools and related college and career access and success programs serving high school students as well as non-traditional adult learners. The goal: to get the Appalachian region's postsecondary education attainment rate on par with the rest of the nation and, in the process, improve a workforce challenged by lower levels of post-high school education and training. Postsecondary education is defined by the ARC program as participation in any two- or four-year postsecondary education program or in a training program leading to an industry-recognized

certificate, or enlisting in the military by the fall following graduation from high school.

During the period 2011-2016, the AHE Network opened postsecondary education doors to 120,904 students in 220 high schools and to 6,699 non-traditional adult students. The 2015 graduates of the high schools participating in the AHE Network's programs had a postsecondary education enrollment rate of 63.5%, a rate 9.5 percentage points higher than the reported postsecondary education enrollment rate of 54% for students graduating from low-income high schools, places where half of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch (Tizon 2016). This means that an additional 11,486 students who were not expected to continue their education beyond high school did so. The non-traditional adult students served had a postsecondary education enrollment rate of 52%.

This report is a snapshot of the most recent five years for which data is available on the AHE Network's efforts in predominantly educationally and economically distressed areas in Appalachia. It depicts the context in which the AHE

"When I began working with ARC some 20 years ago, I had no idea what structure was, what a curriculum was supposed to be, and no idea what a standard was. ARC helped mold my beliefs. It helped mold me as an administrator. I matriculated from a small school principal to the leader of a district. With the hard work of our staff, our system has developed into one of the the top rural districts in the South. ARC has played a big role." —Mike Jones, School Director, Fentress County, Tennessee

Network programs operate—present-day Appalachia—and illustrates services provided and results achieved by the schools and the students. The report also discusses the persistent barriers to postsecondary education attainment in the region and offers strategies to address the barriers and to guide the efforts of the four stakeholders responsible for student success: family, institutions, community, and the students themselves. *Opening Doors, Changing Futures* concludes with two important messages: it takes collective efforts and collaborative actions among stakeholders to prepare students to take advantage of and succeed in postsecondary education, and it takes time. It is the AHE Network's hope that the information will motivate readers to step-up their efforts to increase postsecondary education opportunity and attainment in Appalachia and, in the process, develop a stronger workforce and a more prosperous region.

PRESENT-DAY APPALACHIA

"Being a first generation college graduate from Appalachia, I know how vital education is to our area. Never would I have realized 30 years later that I'd have the ability to focus on kids just like me. I attend the AHE Conference religiously. I see how what I learn benefits our school district." —Tim Conley, Technology/Gifted Coordinator, Bloom Vernon Local Schools, Ohio

Appalachia—the entire state of West Virginia and part of the states of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia—is not monolithic. Its five sub-regions—Northern, North Central,

Central, South Central, and Southern—combine to form a region of contrasting economic, educational, and civic environments and opportunity conditions. The region is home to more than 25 million people, covers 420 counties and almost 205,000 square miles; 42% of the population is rural (ARC 2017). According to the Rural School and Community Trust, at least one third of the total number of students in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina and West Virginia, and more than one-half of the total number of students in Mississippi attend school in a rural district (Jerry Johnson 2014).

A March 2017 report prepared by the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) for the ARC provides a picture of Appalachia today, confirming the gains made on many of the indicators that influence opportunity (Pollard and Jacobsen 2017). It also identifies areas that need to be addressed, none more so than the area of education attainment.

In Appalachia

- The share of residents in poverty is 17.1% and the child poverty rate is 24.4%. By comparison, the national rates are somewhat lower: 15.5% for residents in poverty and 21.7% for children in poverty.
- The population is less racially and ethnically diverse than the rest of the Nation, but the demographic composition is changing. The minority population of 17.5% is below the national level of 37.7% (Pollard and Jacobsen 2017). However, minorities are a small but growing share of the population due to increases in the Hispanic population. Excelencia in Education, a national organization

monitoring the status of Latino educational achievement, recently identified two colleges in Appalachian Georgia (Dalton State College and Georgia Gwinnett College) and one college in Appalachian Tennessee (Southern Adventist University) as emerging Hispanic-serving institutions, that is, institutions of higher education with between 15%-24% undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment (Excelencia in Education 2017).

- The population in southern Appalachia (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina) is growing at 4.4%, a rate higher than the nation's growth rate of 4.1%.
- The current high school graduation rate of 85.5% is within 1.2 percentage points of the nationwide rate of 86.7%.
- The percentage of individuals with an associate's degree (8.2%) is slightly higher than the nationwide rate of 8.1%. This is the same gap reported in the PRB's 2007-2011 report (Pollard and Jacobsen 2013).
- The postsecondary education attainment rate of persons age 25-64—Appalachia's workforce—is troublesome.
- 54.7 percent of persons in Appalachia's workforce hold only a high school diploma, an increase of 1.7 percentage points since the 2007-2011 report to ARC from the PRB. The 2017 Distressed Communities Index confirmed that "over half of the adults living in distressed ZIP Codes are attempting to find gainful employment in the modern economy armed with only

a high school education. The report also confirmed that disparities in educational attainment appear to be closely linked to the diverging fates of communities" (Fikri 2017).

- The percent of persons with a bachelor's or higher degree increased to 22.6%, a gain of 1.6 percentage points since the PRB's 2007–2011 Chartbook. Although the rate increased in Appalachia, it also increased nationwide. Thus, the attainment rate of persons in Appalachia with a bachelor's or higher degree is holding steady at 7.2 percentage points lower than the nationwide rate (Pollard and Jacobsen 2013).

It is difficult to attract new business with a workforce in which over half of the participants have only a high school diploma and only 22.6% hold a bachelor's degree or more. While the region's attainment rate for persons with a bachelor's degree has increased—the current percentage of people in Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia with that degree is at least 10 percentage points below the national share. While not all good jobs require a bachelor's degree, this is an indication of the lag in educational attainment in the region.

The message "the 21st Century economy demands a highly trained and skilled workforce" is beginning to take root in Appalachia, but the region must begin to build on its success increasing its high school graduation rate and increase its postsecondary education attainment rate. Diversifying the region's economy and developing a more highly educated workforce are central to the survival of individuals, families and communities in Appalachia.

OPPORTUNITY IN APPALACHIA

"Too often it's your ZIP Code that predetermines your destiny" (Opportunity Index 2016).

Simply stated, opportunity is the opening of doors that improve an individual's life chances—educationally, economically, and civically. In America, long-hailed as the "land of opportunity," opportunity is not evenly distributed. Many forces have an impact on opportunity and are in play, such as where you live, economic environment, barriers and inequities facing people of color, family educational background, and the quality of the school system. Since 2011, two organizations, Opportunity Nation and Measure of America, have published the Opportunity Index (Index) as a tool to help state and local policymakers and stakeholders identify opportunity conditions and the challenges faced by residents and, more importantly, as a tool to help them work together to craft context-based solutions.

The Index is an annual composite measure of the health of states and communities based on the key indicators that expand or delimit opportunity:

- **Economic**—jobs, affordable housing, inequality, wages, assets, internet access, poverty;
- **Education**—pre-school enrollment, on-time high school graduation, associate's degrees or higher; and
- **Community and civic life**—access to healthy food and health care, disconnected youth, group membership, community safety, volunteerism.

The Index provides a picture of opportunity across the 50 states and the District of Columbia and across 2,763 counties representing 99% of the nation's population. States receive an Opportunity Score based on a scale of one to 100; higher scores equal stronger opportunity conditions in a state. Each county's Opportunity Score is translated into an Opportunity Grade—A through F. A higher grade indicates stronger opportunity conditions in counties and communities in a state.

In 2016, the average Opportunity Score in the United States was 54, but scores ranged from a high of 65.8 in Vermont to a low of 43.4 in New Mexico. Twenty-eight states had scores higher than the national score and 23 states had scores lower (Opportunity Index 2016).

Table 1 (p. 5) identifies the Opportunity Scores earned by the 13 states in Appalachia and the Appalachian counties. The county scores are translated into letter grades. Table 1 also identifies the point difference between a state's score and its Appalachian counties' scores or grades to enable Appalachia's policymakers to notice and address opportunity gaps more effectively.

The average Opportunity Score earned by the 13 states in Appalachia was 52.4, slightly lower than the average national Opportunity Score of 54. However, no county in Appalachia had a score higher than its state's score, and only 19 counties in Appalachia had scores higher than the national score of 54. These counties were less rural and boast robust economies, a more highly educated population, and a range of two- and four-year colleges and universities. The scores earned in the Appalachian counties translated into letter grades ranging from C+ to D+ with an overall grade of C in the region. With a few exceptions, there are significant challenges to opportunity in the Ap-

TABLE 1: OPPORTUNITY CONDITIONS IN APPALACHIA, 2016

STATE	STATE OPPORTUNITY SCORE	OVERALL OPPORTUNITY SCORE IN APPALACHIAN COUNTIES OF THE STATE	DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STATE'S OVERALL SCORE AND THE APPALACHIAN COUNTIES' SCORE	APPALACHIAN COUNTIES' OPPORTUNITY GRADES
Alabama	47.7	43.7	- 4.0	C-
Georgia	48.1	43.6	- 4.5	C-
Kentucky	49.8	41.5	- 8.3	C-
Maryland	61.1	48.7	- 12.4	C
Mississippi	45.6	40.0	- 5.6	D
New York	58.3	50.0	- 8.3	C+
North Carolina	53.0	47.2	- 5.8	C+
Ohio	53.5	44.6	- 8.9	C
Pennsylvania	56.5	49.4	- 7.1	C+
South Carolina	50.4	45.1	- 5.3	C
Tennessee	50.2	43.5	- 6.7	C
Virginia	58.4	45.7	- 12.7	C-
West Virginia	48.9	48.9	0	C+

palachian region of each state, and policymakers need to pay attention to the two indicators that correlate most strongly with a state's Opportunity Score: the poverty rate and the youth disconnection rate identifying youth not working and not in school (Opportunity Index 2016).

EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY IN APPALACHIA: THE AHE NETWORK IN ACTION

"The high school graduates who head off to campus in the lowest proportions in America are the ones from rural places" (Tizon 2017).

Much has changed since the ARC built on the work of the Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education (OACHE) and developed an expanded postsecondary education initiative. During school years 2011-2016, Network members in six states (Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee) operated Program Centers and provided services and small grants to eligible high schools. Members in four states (Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia) operated Resource Centers and directed career and college access programs, such as Educational Opportunity Centers (EOCs) and College and Career Coaching initiatives.

> "The AHE Network has created a model for helping schools and communities open doors to opportunity through partnerships." **Angela Kirtdoll, AHE Network Program Mentor**

> "This program provides our local school systems with an ability to provide programs for and needed services to students…; . . . based not on state or federal competency, such as test scores, but on the needs of the students. It empowers each school and educator with the ability to make a difference in the lives of their students." **Sandy Ott, Director, Blue Ridge Campus, University of North Georgia**

All Centers are united by the common goal of increasing postsecondary education attainment. To achieve this goal they serve as providers of services and as clearinghouses of information in their work with schools, economic development agencies, workforce development agencies, and postsecondary educational institutions serving educationally and economically distressed counties in the region. Research confirms that intentionally designed activities, practices, and policies can influence the development of college-going cultures and promote postsecondary education-going and success in predominantly rural schools.

The Centers' services help students overcome social, cultural, emotional, and informational barriers to continuing and being successful in their education beyond high school. For example, the North Carolina Center provided a range of services to students in six high schools and found that "services provided in isolation may not make a significant impact, but a combination of services made a substantial impact" (Linking Economic Development and Education 2016). By providing a combination of services, the Center promoted a postsecondary education enrollment

rate among the participating high schools 20.7 percentage points higher than the region's average.

The range of services provided by the AHE Centers is documented in Table 2 (p. 8).

The Centers' services may appear to be focused solely on the technical and informational aspects of postsecondary education access and success; however, they also provide opportunities to combat the isolation and narrow perspectives often found in rural communities and to help increase students' education aspirations. Students take part in experiences that broaden their understanding of the world beyond their own community and expand their vision of a different future, in short, experiences that help increase their post-high school aspirations. The varied experiences also help increase students' confidence in their own capabilities and are considered by the AHE Network to be as or more impactful than the more technical services. Toward the end of the time period that is the focus of this report, the Centers began implementing activities to increase the completion rates of the students who enrolled in postsecondary education. Those efforts are continuing, but the impacts are not yet known.

BARRIERS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION ATTAINMENT IN APPALACHIA

"The most important lesson of my life is not that society failed to provide me with opportunities… There is a need for better policies based on a better understanding of what stands in the way of 'kids like me'" (Vance 2016).

> "Poor rural students like me cannot be expected to know what opportunities are available. We need support if we are expected to attend college; at any institution… we require extra assistance with applications, the college transition, and the cultural transition to college."
> —Amanda Wahlstedt, native Appalachian, sophomore, Wellesley College; member, Student Voice Team, Kentucky

The report, "Appalachia Rising," underscored the importance of Appalachian culture in education improvement initiatives" (Kannapel 2015). The same can also be said for the impediments to post-high school education and training in the region. The AHE Network Center directors work within the context of and address postsecondary education barriers that are well-known and well-documented, including academic under-preparedness, social and geographic isolation, inadequate or spotty access to the internet, competing family and work commitments, and lack of information about financial aid. Of note, a recent study of rural and non-rural high school sophomores' postsecondary education aspirations found that the reason most frequently given for not expecting to pursue education beyond high school was financial concerns (Burke 2017).

Based on her experiences as the director of retention at Concord University, Dr. Sarah Beasley highlights additional barriers for students in rural areas: little access to information about college, lower educational aspirations, family members who did not attend college and are less likely to encourage higher education, fewer highly educated role models, and cultural misconceptions

TABLE 2: ILLUSTRATIVE SERVICES PROVIDED BY AHE NETWORK PROGRAM AND RESOURCE CENTERS

POSTSECONDARY AWARENESS ACCESS & SUCCESS	CAREER DECISION INFORMATION	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, AND COUNSELORS	SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES ON NAVIGATING POSTSECONDARY PROCESSES
Visit colleges and universities and technical training programs	Visits to industry and business; meet with staff and leaders*	Mathematics preparedness ACT and content-specific	Informational meetings with families and students; emphasis on why postsecondary education is important
Postsecondary summits; meet with college students from rural areas	Exploration of area job market, career paths, and academic requirements	Training on non-cognitive factors that have an impact on achievement	FAFSA training and assistance
College fairs	Career coaching; career fairs	Data usage training	Scholarship searches
Leadership training; résumé development	Interview training	Formative assessment training	Help with college applications
ACT preparation	Business etiquette introduction	Making connections with postsecondary staff to confirm expectations and align course material	College matching

The centers provided students with direct information about careers in various industries, including advanced manufacturing, financial services, utilities, agriculture, healthcare, aerospace, information technology, telecommunications, STEM fields, hospitality, and lumber, wood, and paper.

about the value of and need for education beyond high school.

The persistent and growing opioid crisis in Appalachia is also a barrier to postsecondary education attainment that must be added to Beasley's list. Calling the opioid crisis in Appalachia a frightening reality, the *Marshall Journal of Medicine* reported, "While overdose deaths and crime lead the headlines, other consequences are equally concerning. The number of children born exposed to opiates has skyrocketed… Young adults with felony drug convictions can't find employment. This problem has shredded the family structure in our communities" (Becker 2016). The pervasiveness of the crisis was confirmed when nearly all 120 participants at the AHE Network's 2017 annual conference stood in answer to the question, "Is there an opioid problem in your community?"

Strong cultural factors, a historical resistance to "getting above your raising" and a lack of confidence are impediments to postsecondary education access and success in Appalachia. A study of the factors influencing the college aspirations of rural West Virginia students acknowledged that, "while rural West Virginia might not represent the entirety of Appalachia (e.g., urban and suburban youth or youth from other Appalachian states), the study targeted a population that may be at particular risk for economic, social, and cultural influences unique to Appalachia that hinder educational attainment:

- Localism—a sense of belonging and of being a part of the land/place;
- Historicism—the sense of understanding one's place in history within the family and region; and
- Familyism—the maintenance of strong family ties" (Chenoweth 2004).

"A college student [in our College Pen Pal program] posted on Facebook: 'I received a College Pal letter from 1st graders today, and it meant the world to me. College isn't all that it's made out to be. It's very stressful… along with trying to balance a job. There are so many days I would like to give up and quit, but I know there are children out there looking up to me. I would like to finish college and be able to show children no matter your situation you can still achieve your goals. I'm so thankful for the people in my life that have kept encouraging me.'" —Patricia Pace, Counselor, Sunbright PK-12 School, Morgan County Schools, Tennessee

Together, these influences make it difficult for Appalachian youth to seize opportunities that will prepare them for better futures—futures that differ substantially from what their families have known and, perhaps, futures away from "home."

J.D. Vance, the author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, wrote eloquently about his turbulent childhood. Without using the language of educational researchers, his depiction of daily life in Appalachia reinforced the power of localism, historicism, and familyism (Chenoweth 2004). Vance also documented the staying power of these influences as he described his path from public school systems in Kentucky and Ohio to the U.S. Marine Corps, The Ohio State University, and Yale Law School. In highlighting the inner conflict inspired by his rapid upward mobility, he stated, "One consequence of isolation is seeing standard metrics of success as not just unattainable but as the property of people not like us" (Vance 2016, p. 244). Students striving for or achieving postsecondary success may

feel that they do not belong in their new space or at home. Psychologist Claude Steele, whose research focuses in part on how people cope with threats to their self-image and self-identities, reminds us that, "belonging is necessary for learning" (Steele 2007).

The Student Voice Team (SVT) of Kentucky's Pritchard Committee for Academic Excellence studied how their peers were managing the transition from high school to postsecondary education. In their report, the students identified three major categories of obstacles or "tripwires" to postsecondary education success: *The Birthright Lottery, Veiled College Costs, and College and Career Unreadiness*. The central theme of the tripwires preventing postsecondary education readiness identified by the SVT's research was inequality (Uncovering the Tripwires to Postsecondary Success 2015).

Rachel Belin, the SVT founder and director, offered additional thoughts about the team's discussions with students, families, and school staff members in rural Kentucky: "Too many of our rural and lower-income students are having to justify decisions to pursue higher education having gotten the message that college is for the elite and a direct affront to the choices their parents made to make a living." As one parent in Hart County said, "You don't need a college degree to be a plumber, and plumbers do just fine" (Student Voice Team Interview Insights 2017). While that parent is correct, many employers now require at least one year of training beyond high school that leads to an industry recognized certificate.

AHE NETWORK RESULTS

"...Our work creates pathways to [postsecondary] opportunity. We build networks—at the local, state and national levels—that support students." —Brenda Haas, Associate Vice Chancellor, Ohio Department of Higher Education; former Director, Ohio Center

During the time period studied in this report, the six Program Centers funded by ARC (Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee) provided opportunities based on the original program model of providing small grants to high schools in economically and educationally distressed counties on the basis of a competitive process. The grants, coordinated by an on-site school staff member, made it possible for high schools to implement low-cost, high-impact services to address the academic, social, emotional, and practical postsecondary-going barriers faced by students. The four Resource Centers (Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia) operated diverse college and career ac-

"The Mississippi Higher Education Initiative – Appalachia increased the average postsecondary-going rate in 12 high schools. One of the keys was a framework matching schools with economic development agencies and creating school-community partnerships. I rate this as one of ARC's most effective investments." —Phil Hardwick, Director of Business Analysts, Else School of Management, Millsaps College; former Director, Mississippi Center

"Career counselors worked with high school students on career plans and with school staff on special events, such as educator in the workforce and industry day/week. The students appreciated learning about local career opportunities and the employers appreciated the opportunity to make the students aware of available career opportunities." —Pam Streich, Director of Strategic Planning and Project Management, Workforce Solutions for North Central Pennsylvania

cess and success programs and served as information hubs.

Collectively, the nine AHE Centers worked with 220 high schools and served 120,904 high school students; the schools achieved a postsecondary education enrollment rate immediately upon graduation in 2015 of 63.5%, meaning that 11,486 more students continued their education beyond high school than otherwise would have been predicted. This enrollment rate was 9.5 percentage points higher than the estimated postsecondary education enrollment rate of 54% for graduates of low-income high schools, and a rate 8.4 percentage points higher than the rate (55.8%) achieved by AHE Network programs during the period 2005-2010 (Schwartz 2012). Additionally, the Center in West Virginia served 6,699 non-traditional adult students and promoted a postsecondary education enrollment rate of 52%.

The results of the Program and Resource Centers' work are based on data provided by the Centers and, where possible, confirmed on the state's education agency website. Although data collection has improved substantially, there are still limitations. Some schools are in districts that feature postsecondary education enrollment data on their websites, as well as on individual high school's report cards. The data reflect total number of schools and students served, but they are not necessarily the same schools or the same students served over the five-year reporting period due to shifting eligibility requirements. The on-time graduation rate is the four-year cohort graduation rate for school year 2014–2015, and the postsecondary enrollment rate is the number of students served in that school year who enrolled in a postsecondary education institution in the fall following high school graduation. Since states do not capture postsecondary enrollment data on students who enroll in private institutions, in institutions in another state, or students who join the military, the postsecondary enrollment rates achieved by the participating schools may be even higher.

The infographic on p. 12 depicts the collective impact of the AHE Network's Program and Resource Centers on postsecondary education enrollment. Infographics depicting the impact of each Network members' program and providing contact information for each Center are posted on the AHE Network's web page, www.ahecenters.org. You can contact your Center director to learn more about the Network's efforts in your area.

The AHE Network Centers have played a role in changing the behavior and the actions of students and schools and in strengthening postsecondary education pathways. They also have had an impact on the community's durable institutions. In response to an AHE Network Survey of October 2016, Center directors identified the overall impact of their programs, ranging from raising expectations for all students to increasing

Appalachian Higher Education Network
2011-2015

...working with schools, families, communities and diverse partners to increase postsecondary education attainment in Appalachia.

Opening Doors, Changing Futures

The Appalachian Higher Education Network focuses on increasing postsecondary education attainment through expanded opportunities – that is, by opening doors that might otherwise remain closed. It is a collection of Program Centers funded in part by the Appalachian Regional Commission and Resource Centers funded by other sources. Centers serve high school and/or non-traditional adult students in the region.

Network Partners

Program Centers

OH- Shawnee State University
PA- Workforce Solutions for North Central PA
VA- Southwest Virginia Community College
WV- Bluefield State College

Resource Centers

AL- Bevill State Community College
GA- University of North Georgia
KY- Morehead State University
MS- Stennis Institute, Mississippi State University
NC- Appalachian State University
TN- SouthEast Educational, Inc./ First Tennessee Development District

Illustrative Services & Resources Provided

- Travel to explore 2/4-year colleges, universities, and technical/industry training programs
- College and career coaching; college matching
- Career pathway activities including written plans, interview preparation, resume development, and job shadowing
- Preparation for the ACT or SAT
- FAFSA training; help completing FAFSA and college/training program applications; help identifying scholarship and grant opportunities
- Information sessions on dual credit, AP coursework, and IB programs
- Postsecondary summits with opportunities for peer-to-peer discussions
- Professional development for administrators, teachers, and counselors on ensuring student success
- Support- from start to finish- for parents and families as they navigate postsecondary education processes

220 Public Schools Served

120,904 High School Students Served

89.7% Participating Schools' Class of 2015 Graduation Rate

63.5% Participating Schools' Class of 2015 Postsecondary Enrollment Rate*

Data sourced from state government agencies.
For more information: http://www.ahecenters.org/

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* the WV program served an additional 6,699 older adult students and had a 52% postsecondary enrollment rate. The total does not include MS or WV data. 2015 Postsecondary enrollment data was not available for MS.

the community's understanding of the connection between increased postsecondary education attainment, the workforce, and their economy. Table 3 (p. 14) captures the Center directors' responses.

The AHE Network Center directors are passionate about their work and its value and lament their inability to serve more schools and students. They also cite the need for greater collaboration among programs focused on increasing postsecondary education attainment as well as among the agencies and organizations sponsoring such programs. The AHE Network's 2017 region-wide conference, "Working Together for a Change," focused on collaboration. As one respondent said in an evaluation comment, "The single most valuable fact that was reinforced for me at the AHE Network 2017 Conference was the importance of working together through collaborations—no single entity can do everything, but together we can achieve our mutual goals/outcomes."

STRATEGIC ACTIONS TO INCREASE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY AND ATTAINMENT IN APPALACHIA

"Opportunity in America—to reach the middle class, have a good job and career, and contribute to one's community—depends on success in postsecondary education" —A Stronger Nation, 2016, p.2

Increasing postsecondary education opportunity and attainment in Appalachia is not a goal that can be achieved through the actions of any one system, organization or agency, individual, or policy working alone. Rather, it requires cross-boundary solutions, the harnessing of all assets, and collaborative actions. According to Dr. Aaron Thompson, there are four categories of stakeholders that have a major influence on student success: Family, Institutions, Community, and Student/Self. He found that when all four are in support of educational success and working together, we see positive outcomes (Thompson 2015).

Thompson's student success taxonomy provides the starting point for identifying strategic actions that stakeholders can take to increase postsecondary education attainment in Appalachia. Based on its experience and expertise, the AHE Network identified three target stakeholders that influence student access to and success in postsecondary education and suggest strategic actions that, if taken, can help to ensure the success of all students. Only when the region's assets work collaboratively will it be possible to increase postsecondary education attainment in the region and help transform Appalachia. A few words of wisdom based on the research and best practices in promoting student success are provided for consideration by policymakers and practitioners and other stakeholders. Absent support from the three external stakeholder groups, students will

"Postsecondary education attainment helps break the cycle of poverty and establishes positive role models in families. In turn, this helps raise the value of education in rural communities." — Dr. Sarita Rhonemus, Director, RBA Program, Bluefield State College, and AHE Network Program Mentor

TABLE 3: OVERALL IMPACT OF AHE NETWORK PROGRAM AND RESOURCE CENTERS

ON STUDENTS	ON SCHOOLS	ON POSTSECONDARY PATHS	ON COMMUNITIES AND INSTITUTIONS
Raised expectations for all students	Student success is celebrated; promotes positive examples for younger students	More students taking advantage of dual credit enrollment	Increased understanding that postsecondary education going can help improve regional economy
State and national recognition for student success	Changed attitudes and perspectives of school staff who decide if a student is (or is not) ready for postsecondary education	Youth making more careful postsecondary education and career plans	Facilitated innovative workforce development systems
Increased postsecondary education-going and retention rates	Families more comfortable with children exploring wider range of postsecondary options	Schools achieving higher postsecondary education enrollment rates	Positive impact on community through education, providing hope and opportunities
Additional career and guidance counselors employed and peer mentors utilized	Services provided based on needs and futures rather than competency scores	Development of a postsecondary education going culture	Growth in community partnerships
Job shadowing opportunities created multi-generational excitement	Postsecondary education an expectation	Improved goal setting	Region becoming more visible to the "outside" world

> "I see a difference in families being more comfortable allowing their children to explore postsecondary education options outside our immediate area." —Keith Walker, former Director, Kentucky AHED, Morehead State University

be less likely to develop the skills required for postsecondary education success. That is, if the three external stakeholder groups don't do their jobs, the fourth stakeholder group—students—will suffer.

Families: Partner with Schools and Teachers

The family is the stakeholder group that plays a key role in determining the value placed on education. Given the strong, multi-generational family structure in Appalachia, it is imperative that stronger connections be established between schools and families. A strong school-family partnership will enhance student learning and promote an awareness of the many educational options now available in Appalachia to high school students, returning adult learners, adults with little or no postsecondary education, and individuals whose jobs have been or are being phased out. The U.S. Department of Education identified several strategic actions families can take, including: (U.S. Department of Education 2013)

- "Increase their knowledge and understanding of what their children should know and be able to do from birth through secondary school (and postsecondary training) and increase their portfolio of tools and activities that

they can use to enhance their children's learning.
- Develop enhanced knowledge and understanding of educational policies and programs, such as those associated with special needs and Title I.
- Enhance their own skills associated with literacy and language acquisition, degree completion, and job skills."

Institutions: Work Together

According to Thompson, each institution that a student moves through on their educational journey has a different but vital role to play in ensuring they have adequate life skills and receive rigorous instruction, career planning guidance, academic advising, and extra supports when needed (Thompson 2015). Nearly 30 years ago, the late Harold "Bud" Hodgkinson wrote, "Services (such as education, health care…) are provided… by a bewildering array of agencies… Service organizations must learn to communicate across functional lines, and educators must become familiar with other service providers… This means perceiving the client as the most important part of the organization's service." (Hodgkinson 1989).

Strategic actions institutions can take include:

- Heighten and maintain a focus on equity and poverty in order to understand and serve better the varying needs of

> "College and career success coaches work with students in area high schools. They have been instrumental in preparing the students for college and the workforce." —Dr. Mike Henry, Director and Professor, Student Support Services, Southwest Virginia Community College

students. As early as 2005, IEL staff members identified four practices necessary to postsecondary education success for low-income and minority students: access to a rigorous academic curriculum, personalized learning environments, a balance of academic and social support in developing relationships, and an alignment of curriculum among various levels of the education and training systems (Martinez and Klopott 2005).

- Measure and report student progress; take action quickly when students get off track; connect disconnected youth; and provide college and career counselors in all high schools.
- Participate in state, federal, and regional education improvement initiatives focused on postsecondary education access and success such as dual credit programming, advanced placement courses, ACT preparation, AHE Network's programs, GEAR UP, TRIO programs, apprenticeship programs, and research and practice activities undertaken by the Regional Educational Laboratories.
- Develop or amend policies to encourage and stimulate collaboration with agencies and institutions providing services to families. Create new practices and focus on results to provide a mechanism to help all agencies and institutions identify common interests and create common ground.
- Develop partnerships with postsecondary education institutions, workforce development agencies, and with business and industry. Provide opportunities for

> "Through community partnerships, Hamilton High School in Alabama installed a full-service branch bank (with the exception of loans) in the school. It is fully staffed by students and managed by the business teacher. The initiative, including construction and installation, was implemented at no cost to the school; it was fully funded by the bank and other community interests." —Patrick Bolack, Director, Student Services, Bevill State Community College and Center Director Alabama

apprenticeships, job shadowing, site visits, etc.
- Two- and four-year institutions need to ensure a smooth transition from high school to higher education. The report *Personal Competencies for College and Career Success* suggests a focus on student engagement supported by mentoring and peer-to-peer support (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth 2016).
- Pay attention to collecting postsecondary education enrollment data and success data and do a better job disseminating it to policymakers and other stakeholders.

Community: Re-establish the School as the Center of the Community

The authors of Hollowing out the Middle chronicled the importance of the community's role in student success in rural America. "What surprised us most was that adults in the community were… pushing the best and brightest young people to leave and underinvesting in those who

> Kentucky AHED funded six community and technical colleges to develop partnerships with high schools and implement college access and success programs. Each developed a program to meet their and the community's needs and placed more emphasis on career development."
> —Dan Connell, Assistant Vice President, Adult Education and College Access, Morehead State University

chose to stay . . ." (Carr and Kefalas 2009). More recently, *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman concluded that, "The big divide in America... is between strong communities and weak communities... It's community, stupid — not geography. . . The communities that are making it share a key attribute: They've created diverse adaptive coalitions… Local businesses get deeply involved in the school system... They tap local colleges for talent and innovations that can diversify their economies and nurture unique local assets that won't go away" (Friedman 2017).

Strategic actions for communities to take include:

- Identify the community's institutional assets and harness them to support and promote increased educational opportunity for all students. Schools, two- and four-year colleges, and other training institutions are unique and durable assets that need to work hand-in-hand with local businesses to support student success.
- Introduce the concept of postsecondary education to all students, including non-traditional adults and others seeking retraining.

- Develop partnerships between high schools and postsecondary education institutions to align the curriculum with the expectations of two- and four- year colleges and universities and career-related industry training programs. In his blog post, "A Better Future for Rural Communities Starts at the Schoolhouse," Paul Hill commented, "[Rural] students often have little understanding of how the economy works outside their communities—or… of what higher education can (and can't) contribute to employability… Students… aren't learning about the mainstream economy by osmosis from friends and neighbors. They need explicit teaching: about the difference between dead-end jobs and multi-step careers." (Hill 2017).
- Ensure that education leaders are a part of the Chamber of Commerce. Broadening the membership of this organization will help to develop professional relationships between leaders of education institutions and

> "On graduation day I was announced as a cum laude graduate… It finally sank in that my dream, hard work, and perseverance had paid off. When asked what I wanted from college, I remember stating that I wanted a chance to offer myself and my children hope through achieving an education. My next honor that day was seeing my children smiling with pride at their mother and her accomplishment." —Tammy Lynn Angle, EOC Participant, Bluefield State College, West Virginia

business leaders. The result: cross-boundary partnerships that support all students and help build a more effective workforce development system.

- Invest in all students. Youth disconnected from schools, work, and communities is one of two indicators that correlate strongly with opportunity conditions in states and counties. Engage all students before disconnection is a problem.

SUMMARY

"I came to accept during my freshman year that many of the gaps in my knowledge and understanding were simply limits of class and cultural background, not lack of aptitude or application as I'd feared."
—Sotomayor, 2013 as cited in Rosenberg 2017, p. 18

It is the responsibility of three stakeholder groups—families, institutions, and communities—to support the growth, development, and success of the fourth stakeholder group—the students. As noted earlier, young people growing up in poverty or in the absence of interactions with well-educated adults are less likely to hear messages placing a high value on education, develop the self-confidence to envision post-high school education in their future, or develop the life skills that undergird a better future.

A recent Social Science Research Council Measure of America study found rural youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are disconnected—neither employed nor enrolled in school—at rates higher than 20%. In Appalachia, youth disconnection

rates are even higher, with counties like Mc-Dowell (West Virginia), Martin (Kentucky), and Forest (Pennsylvania) registering 45–55% youth disconnection rates. Youth and young adults who are not working or not in school tend to reside in communities where the adults have lower levels of postsecondary education attainment (Sholes 2017).

There are many challenges to increasing postsecondary education attainment in Appalachia: economic downturn in coal mining communities, increased inequity and concentrated poverty, and limited public and private dollars to provide the resources needed to revitalize the region. In Appalachia and the rest of the nation, the nature of jobs and job requirements is changing and requires adapting to new labor market demands and addressing the need for a better-prepared workforce.

But there are assets in Appalachia to help: strong family and community cultures, a growing awareness and participation of employers in supporting dual-generation job training, and cross-boundary partnerships. Augmented by the investments of the Appalachian Regional Commission and by the work of the AHE Network, the region's assets are being strengthened and are enabling new pathways for first-generation students to take advantage of postsecondary education opportunities and prepare for a stronger future—for the students and the region.

Opening Doors, Changing Futures is a story about an investment in Appalachia's future. It documents that in 2015 alone over 11,000 additional students continued their education beyond high school. If the AHE Network programs continue to operate, the same or even greater results could be expected each year. These achievements are the result of partnerships and collaborative problem

solving with the region's high schools and, in some instances, the region's postsecondary institutions. Yes, the report identifies the need to increase postsecondary education attainment in Appalachia but, more importantly, it documents how working collaboratively can increase postsecondary education access and success substantially in the region; all of the high schools with which the AHE Network worked maintained or increased their postsecondary education enrollment rates, the first step toward increased postsecondary education attainment in the region.

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ABOUT THE AHE NETWORK

In 1998, ARC began developing what is now the Appalachian Higher Education (AHE) Network, a group of state-based postsecondary education program and resource centers whose mission is to work with high schools to increase postsecondary education attainment in Appalachia. The AHE Network comprises centers located in 10 Appalachian states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

The Centers are supported by a mentor team that provides technical assistance, training, and support to help implement activities and, through the AHE Network, foster both staff professional development and institutional development and sustainability. The goals are to provide high-level professional development opportunities that introduce participants to the latest thinking about how to increase postsecondary education going and success; share the Centers' and the regions' best or promising practices; deepen participants' professional network, and combat the professional isolation generally found among those working in rural settings. The AHE Network meets in two face-to-face meetings each year—in Washington, D.C., in concert with the Institute for Educational Leadership's Education Policy Fellowship Program Washington Policy Seminar, and at one of the state Center sites. It also sponsors an annual region-wide conference to broaden the impact of the work being done by its members.

Vision: Schools, families, communities, and diverse stakeholders working together to increase postsecondary education attainment in Appalachia.
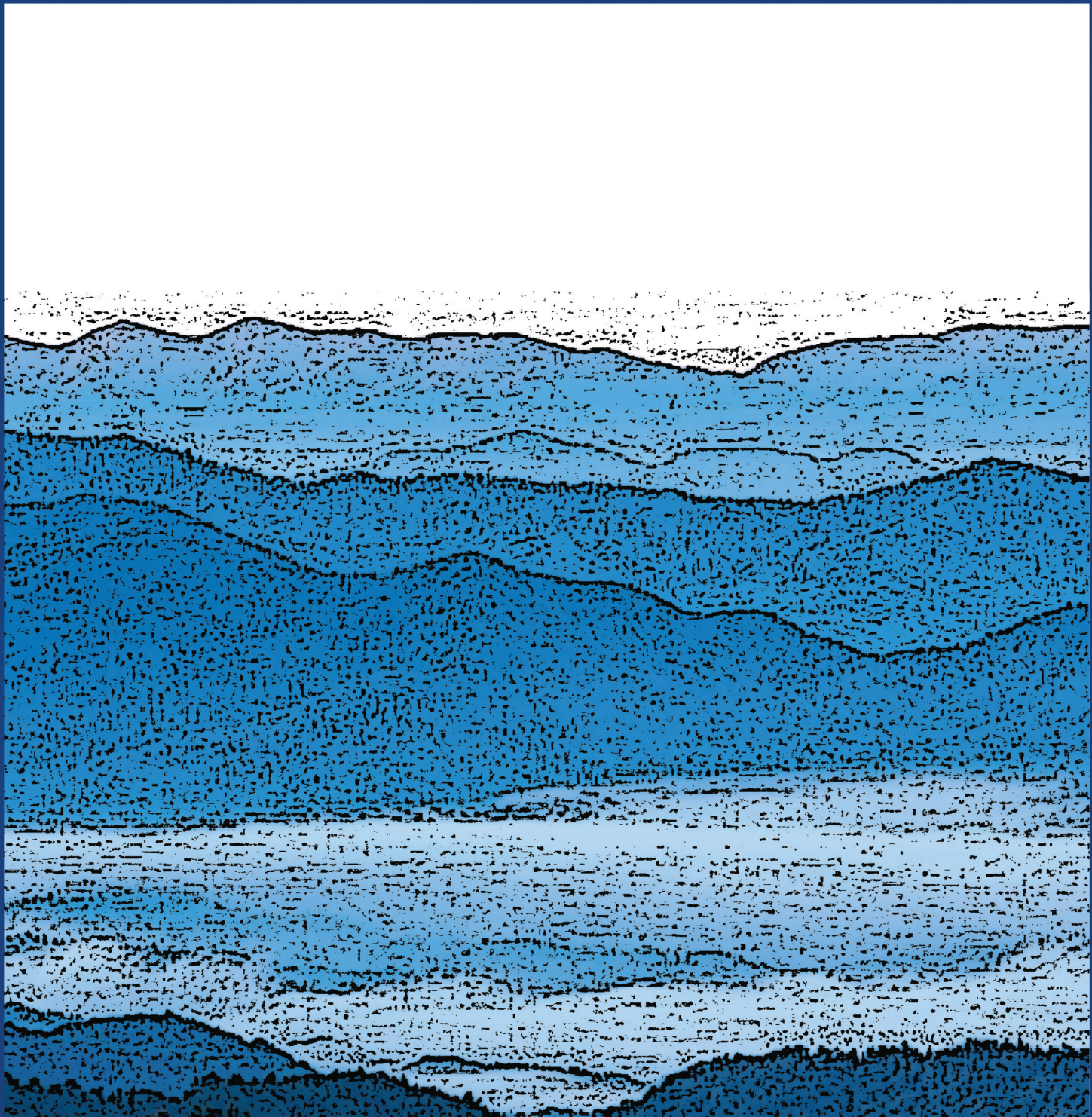
Mission: To increase postsecondary education attainment in Appalachia.

ABOUT IEL

For over 50 years, the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) has championed the need for leaders at all levels to shake off their institutional constraints and work across boundaries to address the needs of young people and their families. Bound by no constituency, IEL serves as a catalyst that helps policymakers, administrators, and practitioners at all levels to bridge bureaucratic silos and undo gridlock to improve outcomes for all young people and their families. The work focuses on three pillars required for young people and their communities to succeed: 1) involving the broader community with public education to support the learning and development of young people; 2) building more effective pathways into the workforce for all young people and supporting the transition to adulthood; and 3) preparing generations of leaders with the know-how to drive collaborative efforts at all levels.

Vision: A society that uses all of its resources effectively to provide an equal opportunity for all children and youth to learn, develop, and become contributing citizens of our democracy.

Mission: To equip leaders to better prepare children and youth for college, careers, and citizenship.

APPALACHIAN HIGHER EDUCATION NETWORK