

EDUCATION

Rural Education Research at Risk Under Trump

With at least 170 education department contracts shuttered, the future of a budding rural education research field is at stake.

by **Nick Fouriezos / Open Campus**

February 27, 2025

The sun sets on Hendry County, Florida. (Photo by Nick Fouriezos)

Donald Trump's first presidential campaign led to a surge in rural attention, research, and support over the last decade, but his second presidency could bring that progress to a sudden halt.

The president declared on Wednesday that he would like to see the Department of Education “**closed immediately**” — just hours after his Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) announced **nearly a billion dollars** in education cuts.

The first cuts were reportedly aimed at the Institute of Education Sciences, the DOE's independent research and evaluation arm, with at least **170 contracts shuttered**. That could be bad news for rural education researchers who had just started to make significant progress in recent years.

The National Rural Higher Education Research Center just opened in September, after being awarded a 5-year, \$10 million grant through the IES. Led by MDRC, which conducts nonpartisan research to improve the lives of low-income Americans, the center is conducting eight major studies in rural areas across 10 states and 25 colleges.

Just two weeks ago, I talked to MDRC researcher Sabrina Klein about the center, which has plans to study a number of education factors critical to Trump's economic goals of building domestic manufacturing and

filling key workforce shortages — from evaluating rural nursing programs in Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming to studying dual enrollment in Alabama, North Carolina and Tennessee.

So far, MDRC has heard nothing from the IES or Department of Education about possible cuts to their funding. But their work provides a glimpse at the kinds of future rural efforts that could be imperiled if federal programs disappear, as both researchers and policymakers take a wait-and-see approach.

Sydney Dickson, the longtime State Superintendent of Utah, told me Wednesday that they were particularly keeping an eye on how Perkins grants — federal funds that support career and technical education (CTE) programs — would be affected.

“We anticipate those programs will be supported, but it’ll be interesting to see what happens to both the dollars and the regulations, because those are things that really impact our rural communities.”

While Dickson said some deregulation may be necessary, what looks like superfluous funding for rural areas could actually be careful resource management. For instance, rural districts sometimes hold federal money in abatement for years. Not because they don’t need it, but because they are saving for a larger purchase.

“They can’t just take the money they get one year and buy the big piece of equipment to train their students on,” Dickson said.

Amid the administration’s war against diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, it’s difficult to separate rural work from those conversations. (The Trump administration has also called for a ban on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs at the federal level. Universities have already been chipping away at them across the country.)

“With all the pressure DEI is under now in higher education, I see the work to engage rural communities as part of that umbrella,” says Rob Vischer, president of the University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, Minn.

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The private Catholic research university has a scholarship program focused on getting new lawyers to practice in rural America. It also offers engineering bootcamps as part of a Defense Department grant to fill manufacturing gaps in Greater Minnesota. Vischer says it's unclear what programs may be affected by the Trump administration's actions.

"We're just trying to get as much information as possible, and provide it to those who could be affected," Vischer says.

While K-12 research has received significant attention over the years, research into rural higher education is still relatively nascent in academic circles.

University of Mississippi higher education professor Ty McNamee often talks about how a peer professor once told him that rural "wasn't an identity" at a conference. While he says there is increasingly more awareness of rurality as an identity worth studying, the recent politics at the federal level is creating a new challenge.

"The really hard part is how do I convince folks who are in favor of the Department of Ed being eliminated, that these actions are going to significantly impact rural and low-income communities?" McNamee says.

"Whether people know it or not, the DOE funds a variety of programs and services that positively impact rural, low-income communities — and if you eliminate that, then you are moving to a state model, when you know that states often don't have a lot of money."

McNamee is one of what Klein calls "a small, mighty, crew" of new rural higher ed researchers, mostly in their thirties or forties, whose niche focus has had an outsize impact on our understanding of rural communities in recent years.

"We need more champions, on every level, developing that next generation of policymakers and researchers," says Klein, whose own journey out of poverty is marked by mentorship and community support — from a state-funded college access program to federal grants that helped her attend Rogue Community College, Southern Oregon University and, later, UCLA.

"That college access program helped me take the things that society had told me were my weaknesses and helped me learn they were my strengths," Klein recalls. "I had no idea what college was, I had no concept of higher education. That was not my lived reality."

Rural students graduate high school at higher rates than their urban and suburban peers, yet consistently lag behind in college enrollment and completion.

Without sustained research into why this gap exists and how to address it, Klein worries that rural communities will continue to lose out on opportunities for economic growth and mobility — the very outcomes that many rural voters hoped Trump’s presidency would deliver.

More Rural Higher Ed News

A helping hand. Rural identity has become more embraced on college campuses in recent years, with student groups forming around their shared rural upbringings. The [North State Student Ambassadors](#) are a great example of this, with CSU-Chico students hoping to provide a roadmap for other colleges looking to better attract rural students and help them acclimate to university life.

- **Mark your calendar:** *In addition to student events on campus and outreach to rural high schools in neighboring counties, the ambassadors are hosting a “Rural Student Voice” conference March 7.*

Large interest in rural PhD. There were only three doctorates in rural education across the country before East Central University launched its own this January. The Ada, Oklahoma institution **was shocked by the number of applicants**, ultimately accepting 72 students and enrolling 52 in its first cohort for the online PhD program. About 90% are from Oklahoma, a state where more than half of the public schools and roughly a third of K-12 students are rural.
