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State Higher Education
Executive Officers Association

Strong Foundations 2025:

INSIGHTS INTO STATE POSTSECONDARY
RURAL DATA

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The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) serves the executives of statewide governing, policy, and coordinating boards of postsecondary education and their staffs. Founded in 1954, SHEEO promotes an environment that values higher education and its role in ensuring the equitable education of all Americans, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic factors. Together with its members, SHEEO aims to achieve this vision by equipping state higher education executive officers and their staffs with the tools to effectively advance the value of higher education, promoting public policies and academic practices that enable all Americans to achieve success in the 21st century, and serving as an advocate for state higher education leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) has tracked the development and impact of postsecondary unit record systems (PSURs) by examining the landscape of state¹ postsecondary data across the United States. Through the **Strong Foundations** survey, SHEEO chronicles the scope and capabilities of PSURs and provides insight into the student unit record data that state agencies² gather, maintain, use, and share. Via the survey, SHEEO explores key aspects of state postsecondary data, including: the number and types of PSURs operating in each state, data elements within PSURs, their connections to other state agencies and longitudinal data systems, and how states leverage PSURs data to advance goals and improve student outcomes.

Strong Foundations 2025 builds on this body of work by examining a new area of inquiry: state agency data related to rural learners, rural institutions, and rural-serving institutions (RSIs). Rural learners, colleges, and communities are key constituencies of postsecondary systems seeking to achieve statewide educational goals. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's urban-rural classification, roughly one in five Americans lives in a rural area.³ Yet while 97 percent of the nation's land area is rural,⁴ less than 10 percent of public four-year colleges are located in a rural area.⁵ For rural learners, this means that postsecondary opportunity is shaped not only by their achievements, but also by where they live and where they matriculate. For rural-serving institutions, rurality presents challenges in resources and capacity, even as it elevates their importance in the community. As SHEEO President Rob Anderson has noted, "For many residents in rural areas, rural-serving colleges and universities are the largest employers in the region, and they are also hubs of cultural and social activity."⁶ For both rural learners and the institutions that serve them, geography and socioeconomic conditions are central to postsecondary opportunity and to the vitality of rural communities more broadly.

Research bears out the notion that proximity to college matters. Areas without a nearby college, or "education deserts," face hurdles in educational access, contributing to persistent gaps in educational attainment.⁷ Data from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) show that about one-quarter of rural residents over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree, compared to 37 percent of those residing in cities and suburbs.⁸ Beyond distance to the nearest college, rurality

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1. SHEEO includes the District of Columbia and all U.S. territories and freely associated states when using the term "state."
 2. Referred to as "state agencies" or simply "agencies" in this report, this term comprises state postsecondary governing boards, coordinating boards, departments of education, and systems composed of two- and four-year and technical institutions. Respondents also included agency staff from P20W/SLDS agencies, whose responses were informed by the postsecondary data in their systems.
 3. U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). *State-level urban and rural information for the 2020 census and 2010 census*. www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html
 4. U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). *County-level urban and rural information for the 2020 census*. www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html
 5. SHEEO analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2024 Institutional Characteristics data.
 6. Anderson, R. (2025). Advancing the rural workforce through higher education. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 57(5), 51-56. doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2025.2539046
 7. Hillman, N., & Weichman, T. (2016). *Education deserts: The continued significance of "place" in the twenty-first century*. Viewpoints: Voices from the Field. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. www.acenet.edu/Documents/Education-Deserts-The-Continued-Significance-of-Place-in-the-Twenty-First-Century.pdf
 8. National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *Percentage distribution of persons age 25 and over, by highest level of educational attainment, age group, and locale: 2019* (Digest of Education Statistics, Table 104.25). U.S. Department of Education. nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_104.25.asp

is also associated with less visible but equally important structural factors, including fewer local employment opportunities, less access to broadband internet, and, in some cases, deep and persistent poverty. While there are numerous factors that contribute to the urban-rural attainment gap, college proximity and the socioeconomic conditions of rural areas play a meaningful role.

The challenges facing rural learners also extend to the institutions that serve them. The [Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges](#) created the Rural-Serving Institution classification for colleges that serve rural populations, regardless of whether the college's address is in a rural area. Their research shows that more than two-thirds of colleges located in counties with persistent poverty are RSIs. These institutions also enroll greater shares of low-income students and rely more heavily on state appropriations than non-RSIs. While these measures represent averages, the conditions of rural areas are not a monolith and vary across and within states – a notion that our survey respondents cited regularly.

Given both the barriers confronting rural populations and institutions and the potential of rural communities to positively impact local and national economies, it is essential to understand how state agencies gather, analyze, and act upon data on rural learners and institutions. To that end, the *Strong Foundations 2025* survey examines the extent to which state agencies collect and use rural data, the catalysts for their work, and the challenges and opportunities they encounter in using this information to inform policy and practice. This report summarizes key findings from the survey, highlighting how states use data to advance policy and outcomes for rural communities. For states not yet engaged in this work, the findings raise key considerations for incorporating rural measures in their data systems and reporting practices.

For more information on the methods used in the *2025 Strong Foundations* survey, see the [Methods, Instrument, & Data Download](#) page of the Strong Foundations website.

DEFINING, COLLECTING, AND USING POSTSECONDARY RURAL DATA

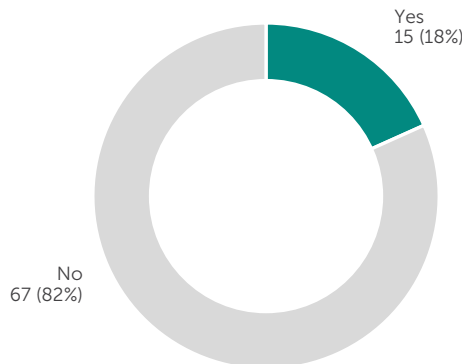
Understanding the landscape and needs of rural learners and institutions in a state requires robust data. Yet survey responses reveal that state agencies vary considerably in how they approach defining, collecting, and using rural data. Across all responses, SHEEO found that 53 percent of agencies demonstrated some form of engagement with rural or location-based data, but the depth and consistency of this work differ substantially across states. For example, some state agencies compare enrollments or outcomes between students inside and outside major metropolitan areas or across regions of the state without framing the analysis in rural terms. In other agencies, rural research occurs on a project basis rather than as an ongoing practice. These variations raise important questions about the infrastructure supporting rural work. How do states define who and what counts as rural? What data sources do they rely on to identify rural learners and institutions? And how are these data being incorporated into analysis work? This section uses results from the *Strong Foundations 2025* survey to examine each of these questions in turn. Taken together, the findings reveal a continuum of state agency progress and capacity for conducting rural data work.

DEFINING “RURAL”

The rural section of the survey begins with two questions that ask state postsecondary agencies whether they have formal definitions of rural learners, rural institutions, or RSIs, and how they conceive of these definitions. As *Figure 1* shows, 15 agencies (18%) from 13 states reported having a formal definition of rural learners, institutions, or rural-serving institutions. The most common formal definition was for rural learners (13 agencies, 16%), while the least common was for rural-serving institutions (four agencies, 5%).

FIGURE 1

DOES YOUR AGENCY HAVE A UNIFORM OR STANDARD DEFINITION FOR RURAL LEARNERS, RURAL INSTITUTIONS, OR RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTIONS?



NOTES:

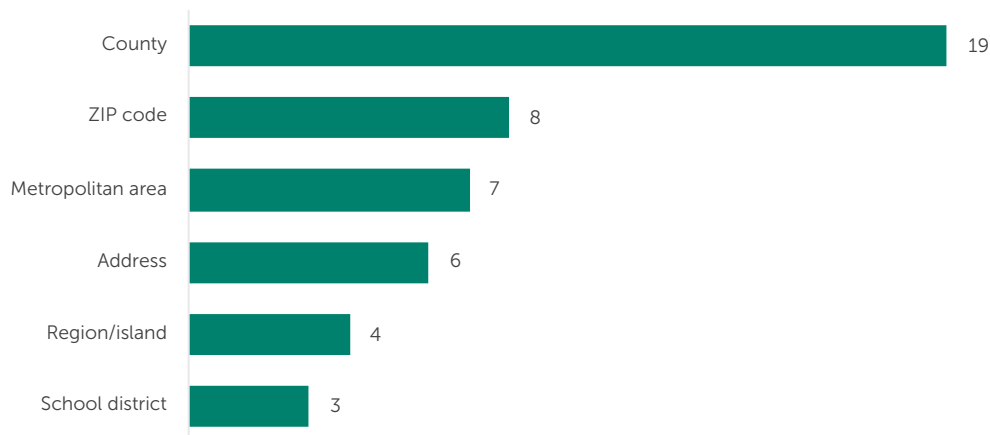
1. State agencies were counted “yes” if they reported having a uniform or standard definition for any of the three rural topics: rural learners, rural institutions, or rural-serving institutions.
2. Six state agencies did not provide a response to the survey question.

SOURCE: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

Responses to the open-ended question “How does your agency define rural learners, rural institutions, or rural-serving institutions?” revealed two broad approaches. Many state agencies define rurality primarily through measures of population density. Others adopt a socioeconomic lens, incorporating factors like poverty, population loss, and educational attainment either alongside or in place of population density. One manifestation of this approach is the use of “distressed county” or similar designations, which combine population density with additional socioeconomic indicators. State agencies adopting this framework expressed skepticism that population density alone captures what rurality means in practice. A governing board in the Midwest, for example, is looking for “better definitions of rurality that are statistically distinct from socio-economic status, first generation, school size, and other factors that we measure.” A southern SLDS similarly noted that “rurality is different in the mountain areas from the coastal plains when it comes to poverty, health, crime, access, etc.” For these agencies, a socioeconomic framework better captures the conditions that rural policy is trying to address.

Regardless of whether state agencies incorporate socioeconomic measures into their definitions, they identified three recurring decisions that they must navigate: which geographic unit to use, which external data sets or typologies to rely on, and which location to consider. The choice of geographic unit emerged with the most consistent pattern. *Figure 2* shows that counties were by far the most commonly cited unit for defining rurality, with 19 agency mentions. Agencies did not offer a clear rationale for this preference, although several noted that federal rural classification systems are often county-based. The second most popular geographic unit to define rurality was ZIP code, mentioned by eight agencies. These responses sometimes noted that ZIP codes were readily accessible from student and institution addresses.

FIGURE 2
GEOGRAPHIC UNITS CITED IN DEFINING RURALITY



NOTES:

1. State agencies could report more than one geographic unit in their open-ended responses. Thirty-four state agencies made 47 references to geographic units for use in current or proposed rural-focused analyses. References from any open-ended survey response are included.

SOURCE: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

State agencies also frequently referenced external classification systems in their definitions. The U.S. Census Bureau was mentioned most often (15 agencies), followed by the U.S. Department of Education (13 agencies), and other state agencies (six agencies). Specific classification systems relevant to rural research include:

- the U.S. Department of Education’s **Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates** program, which assigns all public and private K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions to a 12-category locale that is available in the IPEDS, CCD, and PSS datasets;
- the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges’ (ARRC’s) **Rural-Serving Institutions** typology;
- the U.S. Census Bureau’s **Urban and Rural** classification system, which serves as a baseline for most other federal typologies;
- the Office of Management and Budget’s **metropolitan and micropolitan** statistical areas classification; and
- the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service’s **Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes, and other classifications.**

Despite the prevalence of rural classification systems, several agencies noted that national definitions do not always capture the nuances in their state’s rural communities. As a northwestern governing board explained, “there are different levels of rural in [our state], and the U.S. Census definitions do not adequately identify the various types of rural.” This agency was not alone; several responses mention the tension between aligning to federal definitions, which is useful for cross-state comparisons, and ensuring that rural definitions appropriately apply to local contexts and are consistent across other agencies within the state. In addressing this tension, ARRC notes that “no one definition is all encompassing” and that it is important to “avoid the pitfall of relying on a singular definition of rurality.”⁹ Instead, states can use federal or other definitions as a starting point from which to work through and better understand the nuances that exist within and between state geographies.

“Rurality... is distinctly not unidimensional here—Western (mountain) rurality is distinctly different along most vectors (poverty, health, crime, access, etc.) from Eastern (coastal plain) rurality.”

The third decision agencies grappled with when defining rurality was which location to use, especially for students. While student residence was the most frequently cited reference location (17 agencies), many agencies also mentioned using students’ high school location as a proxy (11 agencies). Using high school locations as a reference location is useful because, as noted above, U.S. high schools are assigned a locale category by ED that largely resolves the question of whether the high school is in a rural area. Several agencies also emphasized the importance of choosing which point in time to use for the reference location. Students may have applied from a rural family address and later moved to attend college in the city, or vice versa. These factors raise questions about the permanence of the effects that growing up in a rural area have on learners, illustrating how the choice of reference location is one of the more complex definitional decisions to make.

9. Koricich, A., Sansone, V. A., Fryar, A. H., Orphan, C. M., & McClure, K. R. (2022). *Introducing our nation’s rural-serving postsecondary institutions: Moving toward greater visibility and appreciation*. Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges.

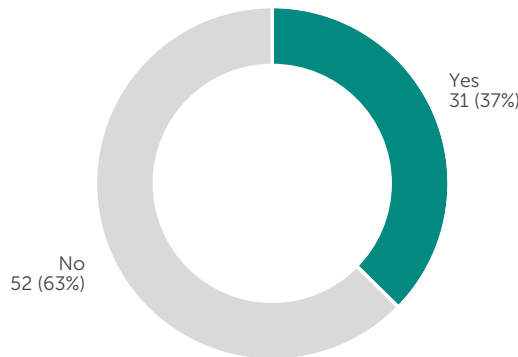
“What is a rural learner exactly? Once a rural learner, always a rural learner or does/can this change over time?”

Navigating these definitional decisions is not straightforward. Defining rurality was the most commonly cited challenge in conducting rural data work, mentioned by 29 state agencies. Their responses pointed to a consistent theme: agreeing on useful definitions of rural learners, institutions, and RSIs is foundational to subsequent data collection and analysis. As one state agency explained, “This fundamental definitional gap prevents us from reliably collecting and effectively utilizing data to understand the specific needs and characteristics of these crucial segments, thereby hindering our ability to inform targeted policies and initiatives for rural communities and educational providers.” Because definitions determine who is included in analysis, they directly influence what data are collected, whether results can be compared across and within states, and how effectively policymakers can target solutions for rural learners and institutions.

COLLECTING RURAL DATA

Translating rural definitions into analysis requires agencies to make decisions about how data elements are integrated into systems, which external sources to collect data from, and how data should be coordinated across agencies within the state. SHEEO asked state agencies if they collect or use data related to rural learners, rural institutions, or rural-serving institutions.¹⁰ Thirty-one of the 83 agencies (37%) responded “yes” to this question.

FIGURE 3
DOES YOUR AGENCY COLLECT OR USE DATA RELATED TO RURAL LEARNERS, RURAL INSTITUTIONS, OR RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTIONS?



NOTES:

1. Six state agencies did not provide a response to the survey question.

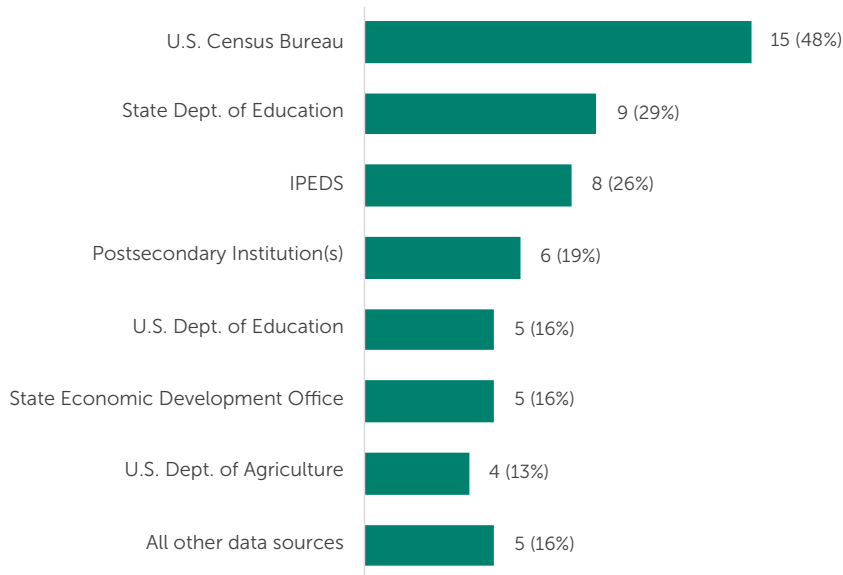
SOURCE: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

10. This served as a conditional question on which the subsequent five questions on specifics related to data collection, storage, and use were skipped if respondents answered “no.” Because this question asked about formal data collection and use together, we cannot distinguish between them.

Of the 31 agencies collecting or using rural data, most have incorporated these measures directly into their PSUR systems. When asked “Does your agency’s PSUR system or other data include data elements or definitions to capture information on rural learners, rural institutions, or rural-serving institutions (RSI)?” 26 agencies (84%) reported doing so for rural learners, another 26 agencies (84%) reported doing so for rural institutions, and 14 agencies (45%) reported doing so for RSIs. While most agencies incorporate rural indicators directly in their PSUR, a substantial minority maintains these data in separate systems. This likely reflects that some agencies link to external geographic datasets, like those from the U.S. Census Bureau, ED, USDA, and ARRC, while others maintain rural indicators in internal datasets.

The 31 agencies collecting and using rural data draw on various external sources to identify and analyze rural populations. *Figure 4* shows which data sources agencies draw upon to analyze rural learners.

FIGURE 4
WHAT DATA SOURCES DOES YOUR AGENCY DRAW UPON TO ANALYZE RURAL LEARNERS?



NOTES:

1. Respondents were able to select all the response choices that were applicable to their agency.
2. This question was asked only of the 31 state agencies that reported they collect or use rural-focused data.

SOURCE: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

The U.S. Census Bureau emerged as the most frequent source (15 agencies, 48%), followed by state-level departments of education (nine agencies, 29%) and IPEDS (eight agencies, 26%). This pattern aligns with the sources that agencies use to define rural learners, institutions, and RSIs. Six agencies (19%) also cited relying on postsecondary institutions, which includes borrowing from research institutes or researchers within those institutions.

Beyond data systems and sources, state agencies also described operational challenges that affect their ability to collect rural data. After definitional issues, data access and sharing problems were the second most commonly cited challenge in conducting rural data work, mentioned by nine agencies. For state longitudinal data systems (SLDSs), this challenge can be especially acute, as

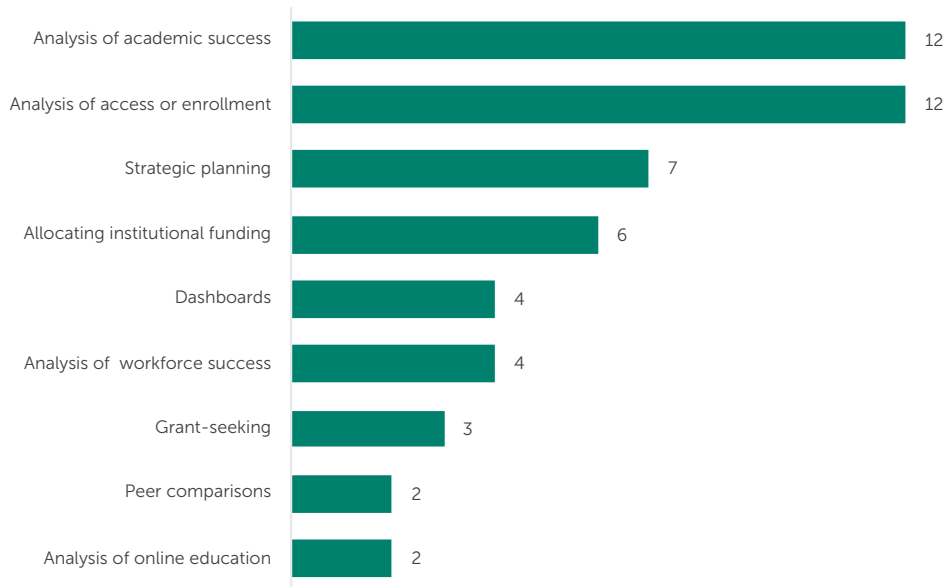
they depend on multiple data providers to collect, manage, and share data in consistent ways. This coordination challenge highlights how rural data collection is not solely a technical problem but also a governance and organizational one requiring voluntary alignment across state agencies.

“One of the key challenges we face as the state’s longitudinal data system is that our access to data on rural learners and rural-serving institutions is dependent on how it is collected, defined, and shared by our agency partner.”

USING RURAL DATA

While Strong Foundations gathered baseline data on which state agencies collect rural data, it was equally important to understand how agencies use this information in policy decisions and external reporting. *Figure 5* shows how the 31 agencies collecting rural data report using it, based on open-ended responses about data usage and reporting.

FIGURE 5
HOW STATE AGENCIES USE OR PLAN TO USE DATA RELATED TO RURAL LEARNERS, RURAL INSTITUTIONS, OR RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTIONS



NOTES:

- State agencies could report more than one rural data use in their open-ended responses. Thirty state agencies made 52 references to purposes for current or proposed rural-focused data use. Most references were provided in response to two survey items: (1) “How is your agency using data specific to rural learners, rural institutions, or rural-serving institutions?” and (2) “Has your agency created any reports, dashboards, or visualizations related to rural learners, rural institutions, or rural-serving institutions?” Additional references were drawn from other open-ended responses where agencies described relevant uses of rural data.

SOURCE: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

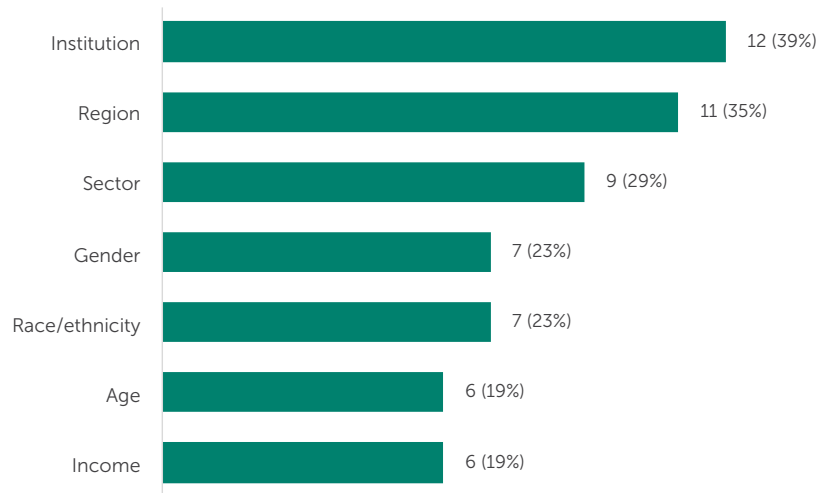
The two most commonly cited uses of rural data were conducting analyses of academic success (12 agencies) and analyses of student access or enrollment (12 agencies). These two issues focus on understanding the impacts of rurality on postsecondary learners, which reinforces the pattern of agencies being more likely to define and collect data on rural learners than on rural institutions or RSIs. Strategic planning (seven agencies) and allocating institutional funding (six agencies) represent the next tier of uses, both of which relate more to state-level applications like institutional oversight and accountability.

Notably, several agencies indicated that while they have the ability to use rural data at the state level, rural institutions in the state have taken it upon themselves to conduct analyses or highlight rurality to advocate for additional resources. Several agencies viewed this as an effective division of labor, noting that rural institutions are closer to the communities they serve and may be better situated to articulate their needs and engage in rural data analysis.

“Data is not regularly or specifically called out for rural learners, however, we have institutions located in rural parts of the state whose student body is majority rural. When funding discussions arise, those institutions will highlight the challenges of serving rural communities and are often given additional funding for ongoing or one-time efforts to improve outcomes for rural students.”

When state agencies do analyze rural learner data, they disaggregate it in a number of ways. *Figure 6* shows how the 31 agencies that collect and use rural data reported disaggregating rural learner data across different elements.

FIGURE 6
HOW HAS YOUR AGENCY DISAGGREGATED DATA ON RURAL LEARNERS?



NOTES:

1. Respondents were able to select all the response choices that were applicable to their agency.
2. This question was asked only of the 31 state agencies that reported they collect or use rural-focused data.

SOURCE: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association

The most commonly disaggregated rural learner data elements by state agencies are Institution (12 agencies, 39%), Region (11 agencies, 35%), and Sector (nine agencies, 29%). Disaggregating by institutions allows state agencies to understand differences in rurality between and across institutions, while regional disaggregation acknowledges that rural conditions can vary across state geographies. Sector disaggregation reflects the reality that different institution types have different relationships and missions regarding rural communities. For example, community colleges, as the name implies, are rooted in serving local communities, in contrast to research universities with local, national, and often global reach. Illustratively, public two-year colleges are nearly evenly distributed across cities, suburbs, towns, and rural areas, while public four-year colleges are about five times more concentrated in cities than in rural areas.¹¹ Student characteristics were cited by about one-fifth to one-quarter of state agencies, suggesting that digging deep into student subgroup comparisons is less common.

It is worth noting that eight state agencies explicitly reported that they do not disaggregate rural learner data, and seven made no selection for a disaggregation category. Thus, only about half of the 31 state agencies collecting and using rural data reported conducting at least one type of disaggregation analysis. In many cases, limited analysis of rural data comes down to a lack of demand and other associated challenges. A lack of analysis requests from state leaders was tied with data access and sharing as the second most commonly cited challenge to conducting rural data work (nine agencies). Capacity and funding constraints (five agencies) and limited legislative prioritization (five agencies) were also cited. As one state agency explained, “At this time, it’s largely a lack of a clear, practical policy driver, statutory requirement, impetus, or data use case. Extending from that, staff capacity to take on a new data collection or reporting initiative is a challenge, especially in an area where we lack a clear policy driver.” This challenge exists even when rural issues are highly salient with policymakers. Without explicit requirements or a clear audience to receive rural reporting, many state agencies struggle to justify dedicating limited staff and financial resources to rural data work.

“Rurality is cited frequently by policymakers in our state, but that doesn’t seem to translate into requests to the System Office for data or reports on rurality and higher education.”

In some states, this challenge is compounded by the pervasiveness of rurality itself. As one governing board in the rural Midwest remarked, discussing rurality “is a bit like a fish asking its friend ‘how’s the water?’ and the friend answering, ‘what’s water?’” In predominantly rural states, constructing rural comparisons can be difficult when there is no substantial non-rural population to serve as a reference comparison. This dynamic may help explain why rural issues can be politically salient without generating formal analysis requests.

11. SHEEO analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2024 Institutional Characteristics data.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE AGENCIES

When asked what it would take to start or improve their rural data work, state agencies pointed to concrete solutions: help in defining rural (20 agencies), receiving analysis requests from policymakers (16 agencies), additional capacity or funding (seven agencies), and support in bolstering collaboration and data sharing (seven agencies). The recommendations that follow are organized around these needs. Whether agencies are already conducting rural analyses or just beginning to consider rurality in their data systems, the following recommendations offer guidance for moving forward.

SEEK CROSS-AGENCY ALIGNMENT AND LEVERAGE FEDERAL RESOURCES

Aligning rural definitions across K-12 systems, workforce boards, and other state partners reduces analytic burden, enables more seamless data sharing, and supports comprehensive policy development that follows students and workers across data systems. As SHEEO President Rob Anderson has noted, “SHEEO agencies can also act as conveners and advocates, bringing together different stakeholders to advance rural-specific workforce development strategies.”¹² Rural workforce challenges span multiple sectors, and having shared definitions enables state leaders to develop, implement, and assess policy solutions in a coordinated way.

Federal agencies offer established classification systems that can serve as foundations for state rural definitions, including those from the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In addition, the rural-serving institutions (RSI) classification system from the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) is an adaptable measure that states should consider using to recognize and support institutions that are in an urban center while serving a largely rural surrounding area.

NAVIGATE THE COMPLEXITIES OF RURAL CLASSIFICATIONS

Defining and applying rural typologies demands careful attention to several complexities. The survey revealed that state agencies grapple with fundamental questions about how to create and operationalize rural classifications. Key considerations include:

- **Timing and permanence.** Are the impacts of living in a rural area instantly gained or lost when a student changes addresses? Rural students who move to urban areas for college may continue to face challenges rooted in their rural backgrounds, from financial constraints to gaps in academic preparation. States must determine whether rural status is fixed at a certain point (such as at application or high school graduation) or dynamic.
- **Geographic reference point.** Which address makes the most sense for classification—application address, high school location, parents’ or guardians’ residence, or current address? Each choice carries implications for which students are identified as rural and how effectively policies reach intended populations.

12. Anderson, R. (2025). Advancing the rural workforce through higher education. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 57(5), 51-56. doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2025.2539046

- **Geographic level.** Counties are reported as the most prevalent geographic unit used in rural classifications, but states should evaluate whether county-level designations align with college service areas, provide sufficient specificity, or mask important variation within counties.
- **Regional variation.** The impacts of residing in a rural area may differ substantially across the regions of a state. States should consider whether a single statewide rural designation adequately captures these differences or whether region-specific approaches would better inform policy and resource allocation. Even with statewide definitions, disaggregating analyses by region can reveal whether different rural areas face distinct challenges.
- **Socioeconomic considerations.** Rural classifications based on population density alone do not always correspond to areas with the greatest economic need. Several states use “distressed county” designations that incorporate population density along with other socioeconomic factors like unemployment rates, household income, and poverty rates. This choice has implications for the data elements that state agencies collect, how analyses are disaggregated, and which students and institutions ultimately receive targeted support.

While there is no single correct answer to these complexities, states should not postpone rural data work for the sake of perfecting definitions or applications. The key is to choose and act upon definitions that align with state policy goals, data infrastructures, and the unique rural contexts within the state.

CAPITALIZE ON POLITICAL SALIENCE TO ADVANCE RURAL DATA WORK

When asked “How salient is rurality or rural issues as a political or social concern among policymakers in your state?” 35 of the 51 state agencies (69%) with a clear answer reported rural issues as moderately or highly salient to their state policymakers. Yet several agencies indicated that they are not conducting rural data analysis because policymakers have not requested it. This gap between political interest and analytical activity provides state agencies with an opportunity to use the existing salience of rural issues to make the case for dedicated rural data work.

Advancing rural data collection and analysis takes staff time and resources amid competing demands. Not every state agency has the capacity to heavily invest in this work. Yet even modest efforts can demonstrate value. Developing pilot studies, producing initial reports, or creating data visualizations that showcase rural student pathways can generate evidence that makes the case for additional investment. In a related interview, SHEEO spoke with a state agency staff member who was hired into a new role dedicated to advancing postsecondary rural data and innovation.¹³ Their experience suggests that investing in rural data capacity can generate momentum by producing research, building partnerships, and creating resources that reinforce the case for ongoing investment. Rather than waiting for directives, state agencies can proactively shape the rural conversation with evidence and capitalize on existing political interest.

13. This interview will be published in an upcoming SHEEO blog post, *Locally Unique, System Strong: Supporting Rural Institutions in North Carolina*.

MOVING FORWARD

As states increasingly recognize the distinct challenges facing rural students and institutions, incorporating rurality into data systems and analysis efforts becomes essential for evidence-based policy development. The *Strong Foundations 2025* findings demonstrate that while the work requires thoughtful planning and cross-agency collaboration, it is both feasible and valuable. State agencies at any stage of this work can take meaningful steps forward to define rural learners, institutions, and RSIs or initiate conversations with their rural-serving institutions to better understand and serve their rural populations.

