

## Ties that bind rural America

Op-ed by President Meredith Woo



COVID-19 has arrived in rural America. The impact of the pandemic, and in its wake, the recession, will be profound. The most rural and isolated of American towns already have the highest rates of poverty, unemployment and population loss, particularly among young people. Those who remain are aging, with rising morbidity rates.

As farms slide into bankruptcy and factories shut down, crime and opioid abuse have become a rural problem. There is no shortage of proposals for how to turn rural America around, from a tax credit for employers in distressed communities, to investment to attract venture capital. Nothing seems to work, and now the pandemic has it reeling.

One of the most powerful forces of economic development is agglomeration. High-tech firms move to where there is a ready pool of highly skilled workers and talents, who learn from each other and attract others to join them. Manufacturing firms move to areas with pre-existing broadband that are closest to super highways, leaving rural towns automatically crossed off through the logistics matrix.

In many rural towns, however, you often find small independent colleges. Founded in happier days for small towns, these colleges are an unusual American invention. Unlike large public universities and land-grant institutions, which were created to train skilled labor in a growing and modernizing economy, these colleges aimed at creating democratic citizens with inquiring habits of the mind.

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Small bucolic towns were the perfect location for such intellectual enterprises, and over time, these colleges became some of the biggest employers in their rural communities. They also are the ties that bind the rural communities, keeping them from being decimated.

Yet, like the rural towns they hold together, these small colleges are “left behind.” In the past year, four small liberal arts colleges closed in Vermont alone, with devastating consequences for their towns. Many rural communities along the Eastern Seaboard and Midwest also rely on the colleges within them, including a half-dozen independent colleges in Virginia. These small colleges and small towns are interconnected — the health of one directly impacts the other.

Good public policy is one that seeks externalities, or beneficial side effects that are not even reflected in the cost of goods or services rendered. By supporting rural colleges, we can support rural America. Despite all the well-meaning intentions to bring new industries to rural America, this strategy has not succeeded. Meanwhile, there are existing assets — rural colleges — that can and should be supported, and this can be done at a fraction of the cost spent subsidizing public institutions.

Sweet Briar is a woman’s liberal arts college in rural Virginia known for its emphasis on women’s leadership, sustainability, and — what is highly unusual for a liberal arts college — engineering. It is also one of the largest employers in Amherst County, contributing more than \$25 million a year to its economy. What had been the county’s biggest employer, a state-run care facility, recently closed. This has increased Sweet Briar’s importance to the area.

Sweet Briar performs indispensable functions for the local community. It has engineering weekends for young girls and numerous other programs to ignite their curiosity. It holds concerts and theater events, it screens movies. It provides free access to its museum, galleries and athletic facilities. It invites the community to hike and bike its 19 miles of trails. College employees and students locally shop and dine.

We live and work here; we are one with our community. As rural America bears the brunt of an impending COVID-19-related recession, Sweet Briar will open its facilities to supplement limited local hospital space, provide free vegetables produced from its greenhouse and we won’t put anyone out of work.

Expenditure per student is high in liberal arts colleges, and moreso in a college with a fully accredited engineering program that produces the finest women engineers. But a college like Sweet Briar is not designed to make profit. It is designed to educate and empower young women as leaders of tomorrow, and perform myriad public functions — economic, social and cultural — for its community.

Colleges like Sweet Briar already exist; they don’t have to be lured in from outside. They might be the best and the most cost-effective way to support rural America.

