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TWC Statement: Key Arguments from TTU Research

1. TWC acknowledges in their self-evaluation that the education-to-workforce pipeline is key to the economic success of Texas, but it does not draw enough attention to the specific needs of rural schools.
2. Our research shows that rural school districts and rural-serving community colleges believe that students need more opportunities to receive specialized training certificates and job preparation opportunities.
3. Our research shows that, while rural school districts and rural-serving community colleges are already pursuing funding, they lack capacity and knowledge in key areas. Namely: they lack knowledge of funding opportunities that are available as well as how to pursue those opportunities; and they lack the capacity to create the needed industry partnerships that would support job preparation opportunities.
4. TWC has already funded a small study and support mechanisms with the aim of better understanding the needs and barriers faced by rural schools, as well as to provide capacity-building activities, but much more financial support needs to be added to this area.
5. TWC should continue but with more funding to support the education-to-workforce pipeline in rural communities. This could be done through an expansion and greater funding of mechanisms like those listed in SB 2448 from the 89th legislative session.

The remainder of this document presents support for the statements above.

1. **TWC acknowledges that the education-to-workforce pipeline is key to the economic success of Texas, but it does not draw enough attention to the specific needs of rural schools.**

The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) self-report for August 2025 states:

“Technological advancements, including automation and AI, are revolutionizing the job market, necessitating a shift towards highly skilled training programs for the next generation of job seekers. Working closely with community colleges and education partners is vital in meeting this need. As a result, the agency must be proactive in developing solutions to equip the workforce with skills that help them remain relevant and meet employer needs in an increasingly automated world (12).”

TWC notes that, if Texas is going to be ready for and capitalize on the ways that AI is transforming the workforce, this will entail considerably more investment in school districts and community colleges in order to provide specialized training and integrate opportunities across the curriculum to gain hands-on experience using AI tools in a way that prepares students for the workforce and further education.

The TWC self-report further states: “Tailored programs are critical to support the diverse needs of the growing population. This period of rapid growth also creates the need for stronger employer relationships to understand evolving workforce demands and align training programs with industry needs (12).” This statement highlights the need for school-industry partnerships as well as capacity building within schools to pursue these types of partnerships.

While the needs for further training and capacity-building are clear in the report, it is disheartening to note that the ~600-page report rarely mentions rural communities. The report contains the word “rural” fewer than 10 times, and the majority of those times are in the listing of key offices within TWC. The report only highlights the needs of rural communities when discussing the SCSEP program for seniors. While it is true that seniors in rural communities experience specific barriers that are endemic to rural spaces, the same can be said of rural school districts and rural-serving community colleges. The TWC should do more to highlight these needs as part of their duties and mandates under the tri-agency agreement between TWC, THECB, and TEA.

2. Our research shows that rural school districts and rural-serving community colleges believe that students need more opportunities to receive specialized training certificates and job preparation opportunities.

Right now, we are in the process of gathering data on the needs and opportunities for rural schools by using surveys, focus groups, and document collection and analysis. Surveys were sent to all rural school districts in Texas (~500) as well as the 21 rural-serving community colleges in Texas. Here are some of our key findings thus far, primarily from survey collection and document collection and analysis. Please note, we are still in the process of gathering data.

When asked to **choose the most significant need for students**, most respondents thought that **access to specialized certifications or credentials or access to internships or specialized job training** programs was the top need.

Access to advanced coursework that will prepare them for the next step	15%
Access to specialized certifications or credentials	24%
Access to specialized extracurricular options	3%
Access to mental health support and wellness support	12%
Support from family or community to stay in school and aim for success	9%
Access to internships or specialized job preparation opportunities	36%

This finding is backed up by research within the field that also highlights the need for more specialized programs that tie education to workforce needs and CCMR outcomes.

3. Our research shows that, while rural school districts and rural-serving community colleges are already pursuing funding, they lack capacity and knowledge in key areas. Namely: they lack knowledge of funding opportunities that are available as well as how to pursue those opportunities; and they lack the capacity to create the needed industry partnerships that would support job preparation opportunities.

From the same survey responses and document collection procedures noted above, we were able to gather information on what rural schools are doing to pursue funding as well as where they see their greatest challenges or barriers.

We asked the following questions. The responses are noted in bold.

- To what degree does your school engage with local industries / businesses? **80%** responded that they engage with local industries / businesses to at least a moderate degree (from the choices: small degree, moderate degree, great degree, very great degree)
- To what degree does your school engage with local governments? **71%** responded they engage with local governments to at least a moderate degree
- To what degree does your school engage with local community members or organizations? **79%** responded that they engage with local community members or organizations to at least a moderate degree.
- Have you applied for external funding? **88%** of respondents have applied for external funding from the state, the federal government, non-profit organizations, or industry partners.

When asked to **choose all types of entities to which they have applied for funding**, respondents noted that they had pursued funding in most avenues open to them.

State of Texas / THECB / TEA	88%
Non-profit organizations	64%
Industry partners	61%
Federal Government Entities	82%

When asked to **which entity they apply most often**, most responded that they apply to the State of Texas.

State of Texas / THECB / TEA	53%
Non-profit organizations	21%
Industry partners	3%
Federal Government Entities	24%

When asked if they had **ever received or pursued in-kind support**, only **53%** had ever received or pursued that kind of support.

When asked to **rank the greatest barriers to pursuing funding**, respondents ranked these barriers in the following order (**#1 being the greatest barrier**):

1. Knowing what programs are available that provide external funding (I don't know what is available to me for money or support.)
2. Knowing how to create industry partnerships (I don't know how to develop and operationalize industry partnerships that could help us.)
3. Having the human capacity / time to go after external funding or partnerships (I don't have the people, the time, or the bandwidth to go after any form of support.)
4. Knowing how to write and develop proposals to go after the funding or support (I don't know how to gather the necessary documents and artifacts or to write a proposal to go after funds or other forms of support.)
5. Having the human capacity / time to manage grant or partnership deliverables once you receive the money/support (I don't have the people, time, or bandwidth to comply with the requirements of the grant or partnership once it is established.)

The data above show that rural school districts and rural-serving community colleges are already striving to pursue funding. However, they lack capacity in key areas. They lack knowledge of where to go for funding. They lack capacity to pursue the funding opportunities. They lack the knowledge and capacity to develop the needed industry partnerships that would support the education-to-workforce pipeline.

4. **TWC has already funded a small study and support mechanisms with the aim of better understanding the needs and barriers faced by rural schools, as well as to provide capacity-building activities, but much more financial support needs to be added to this area.**

TWC was able to provide financial support for the TTU team, in partnership with CEN, to examine and work to address the problems of capacity in rural schools. This Texas Workforce Commission-funded project aims to strengthen workforce development in rural Texas by conducting rigorous research and providing practical tools to support rural school districts and community colleges. The project begins with an in-depth landscape analysis, combining document collection, quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups, to accurately identify existing workforce programs, unmet needs, and service gaps in rural areas.

A central innovation is the creation of a searchable dashboard that links community needs to potential partners and funding sources, promoting coordinated efforts across state agencies, community organizations, and philanthropic groups. Using this data-driven focus, the project develops guides and templates to help stakeholders plan and execute effective partnerships and grant-funded initiatives.

Significantly, the project integrates ongoing efficacy research, including pilot testing and usability studies to evaluate what strategies and resources work best. Performance metrics track engagement, partnerships formed, and funding outcomes, while qualitative analysis captures challenges and opportunities. Furthermore, **the partnership with CEN will allow us to pilot and iterate on trainings for administrative personnel on how to pursue funding as well as how to pursue industry partnerships.**

The goal is to champion rural communities and support the educational institutions that help these communities fund success in the Texas workforce. While this project is off to a good start, it has already become clear that the needs are so great that more support and attention is needed in this area.

- 5. TWC should continue but with more funding to support the education-to-workforce pipeline in rural communities. This could be done through an expansion and greater funding of mechanisms like those listed in SB 2448 from the 89th legislative session.**

SB 2448 did an excellent job of developing the framework for the needed supports named in this document. Rural school communities need more knowledge around and capacity building for going after funding opportunities as well as pursuing industry partnerships. This bill should be expanded and more fully funded to support this kind of work,

The TTU Team (partnering with CEN):

My name is Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer. I am a professor at TTU, and I lead a team of researchers who are working on a project to gather data on the barriers for rural school districts and rural-serving community colleges to support students as they move from education into the Texas Workforce. We are also tasked with building capacity in school districts and rural-serving community colleges as they strengthen their abilities to go after funding, go after in-kind support, and develop community and industry partnerships to support the school-to-workforce pipeline. Researchers on the TTU team include: Dr. Gina Childers, Dr. Jongpil Cheon, Dr. Jessica Gottlieb, Dr. Jacob Kirksey, Dr. Jason Lee, Dr. Kristin Mansell, Dr. Jon McNaughtan, and Dr. Tara Stevens, as well as me, Dr. Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer. Additionally, CEN have been key partners in this work, with Dr. Susan Grove taking a lead role in the research and capacity-building for this project. Our team is dedicated to supporting rural communities, and their specific needs, as they create pathways from schools to a better life through additional education and/or high-paying and workforce needs-aligned careers.