Changing Higher Ed Podcast 147 with Host Dr. Drumm McNaughton and Guest Dr. Andrew Koricich: Rural-Serving Institutions: Innovative Lessons for Higher Ed Success

Transcript:

00:04
Welcome to Changing Higher Ed, a podcast dedicated to helping higher education leaders improve their institutions, with your host, Dr. Drumm McNaughton, CEO of the Change Leader, a consultancy that helps higher ed leaders holistically transform their institutions. Learn more at changinghighered.com. And now, here's your host, Drumm McNaughton.

Drumm McNaughton 00:31
Thank you, David.

Today's guest is Dr. Andrew Koricich, executive director of the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges and an associate professor of higher education at Appalachian State University. Andrew's focus is rural-serving institutions (RSIs), which was influenced by his experience growing up in rural Pennsylvania. Most universities have a growth mentality necessitated by survival. Unfortunately, this mentality extends into the legislature and funding sources, frequently resulting in cuts to RSIs that hurt the institution and its surrounding communities.

RSIs are different. They are frequently part of the critical infrastructure in rural America and need to be thought of in terms of the impact they have on their region, both economically and culturally. Andrew joins us today to discuss RSIs, their vital role in rural America's economy and culture, and their lessons for higher education institutions about the impact and greater good of the college.

Andrew, welcome to the program.

Andrew Koricich 01:41
Thanks, Drumm. Good to be here.

Drumm McNaughton 01:43
Good to have you here. You are a specialist in rural-serving institutions, and I'm really looking forward to this conversation. As you and I discussed, we both think there are many things rural institutions are doing that would positively impact enrollment and other factors at any higher ed institution. But before we get there, tell us a little bit about yourself. How did you get to Appalachian State? Why this project? This is fascinating to me.

Andrew Koricich 02:18
Yeah. I followed an unusual path in my line of work. I grew up in a small rural town in northwestern Pennsylvania with about 10,000 people and 30 minutes or so south of URI. I never planned to do rural-focus work. I was one of those folks who was ready to get out and do other things.

I did an undergraduate degree in information technology, and I have an MBA. I worked in software development for some years and came to higher ed out of that because I liked working with students and institutions during my software development career, and I wanted to do more of that. But I thought I would do more leadership type of work because that's what I'd been doing in a corporate setting.

As I went through my doctoral program, I realized that my story as a rural student was absent from anything I read and, even more so, the stories of my peers who didn't go to college and why that happened. So, I started thinking a lot about rural students and, over time, noticed that, as more people did rural student work, we were still leaving out rural-serving institutions as a critical piece of that puzzle. That's how it came to this work. We need to make sense of rural-serving institutions.

Drumm McNaughton 03:36
That's fascinating. Software to higher ed is quite a jump. I am totally impressed. I was a physics major undergraduate and ended up getting into board governance. People will say, "Oh, yes, they're absolutely the same." No, not a bit. So many of our listeners will not know much about rural institutions. So, give us a little bit of background as a framework for our conversation if you would, please.

Andrew Koricich 04:09
Sure. One of the significant challenges of talking about rural colleges is that there is no one agreed definition of what rural is. The federal government alone uses dozens of definitions. Every state uses different definitions. So, it's been a real challenge depending on what definition to use when discussing different institutions.

But we know that about 97% of our nation's landmass is rural, and they have people living there. So, these public and private institutions are these communities' primary, if not only post-secondary educational access points. Even beyond that, they serve a much broader role than just an educational opportunity. These are often the largest employers in their region. They're helping to launch small businesses and are huge consumers of goods and services from local businesses in the community. More so than in urban areas, these institutions can have an outsized role. It's just on overall social and economic opportunity that services the community's well-being.

Drumm McNaughton 05:20
Yeah. That's huge. When you look at the numbers, over 25% of all colleges and universities in the US are rural-serving, That's a pretty good-sized number.

Andrew Koricich 05:33
It is, and if we were to look at only the ones that grant degrees, then it's an even more significant percentage. That number surprises folks because we think about where people are concentrated, and we forget about the places where people are located with less concentration.

Drumm McNaughton 05:51
More than half of those are community colleges, and community colleges in more urban areas are not so much focused on trades as they are the first two years of gen-ed. In the rural areas, they are much more focused on trade, am I right?

Andrew Koricich 06:14
Yeah, you'll see a significant focus on the types of things in large cities. You don't have any one industry that is the industry. Big cities like New York, DC, or Los Angeles are made up of many major industries. But in rural areas, communities can depend on one

employer or several employers in the same industry. So, that's where these colleges will be tied to. Now it's agriculture and advanced manufacturing. But emerging is hospitality and tourism. For many, that's where a lot of the focus is coming from because they have to be so targeted to what's there when it's not always a broad swath of employers.

Drumm McNaughton 06:57
One thing that makes them very different is that they are very focused. I'm curious, has this focus helped their enrollment?

Andrew Koricich 07:06
It is a function of survival, especially for community colleges, mainly due to our current environment, where there are many questions about the value proposition of higher ed and the relevance of workforce preparation. If these rural-serving community colleges turn away from the industries that are right there, they will lose students.

Even to your point about the transfer mission, they still hold that transfer mission. But that's more complicated in a rural area where you may not have a four-year university within a commutable distance. That transfer always necessitates mobility. These institutions can't just switch and rely on getting students with associate's degrees into bachelor's programs because the geography may not allow that. They also have to consider how many folks don't want to leave there. This is sometimes confusing to folks. Rural people like living in rural places. They're not trying to be sent somewhere else for an opportunity.

Drumm McNaughton 08:06
That makes perfect sense. "I hate people. I don't want to be around people right now." I'm just kidding. It depends on the day, right? But you have been working on this project as part of your research. Tell us a little bit about that because, as part of your project, you're uncovering a lot of the challenges facing these rural serving institutions. So, tell us about the project.

Andrew Koricich 08:36
Yeah. This project is to identify rural-serving institutions across sectors and the country and be purposeful about this idea of rural-serving rather than just rural. Whenever we talk about just rural-located colleges, we're leaving out a lot of land-grant and suburban

institutions on the outer fringes, where everything beyond them is rural. We're saying where you are is what you are. That's problematic because college land grants get so big that they make their communities less rural. We wanted to get into rural serving. This allows us to capture institutions located elsewhere doing this work and moving beyond one definition of a place rather than picking just one definition of rural.

We also wanted to think about what institutions can do that serve rural communities. We've heard this a lot from presidents, chancellors, researchers, foundations, and the like that, absent any sort of order to the chaos of what rural is serving, it's hard for leaders to find the right institutional peers to benchmark against. "Place" is significant for these institutions, and it's hard for funders to figure out whether they're failing to fund rural-serving institutions or if scholars are studying at these places or studying these places. For policymakers, how do we understand who these institutions are for new funding streams?

We used four measures of "place" to get at a more qualitative way of talking about morality with quantitative data. We're looking at clusters of counties. We're not just looking at an institution's home. We're looking at the counties around them to think more about the region they're serving rather than just one county because we know they do beyond county borders. We have four measures of population: size, percentage, rural, and whether they're city adjacent. We also pulled in the percentage of an institution's credentials and awards that are in three fields of unique rural importance: agriculture, natural resources, and parks and recreation.

These aren't just stereotypes. We performed data analysis and our research on other work. It became pretty clear that these are uniquely rural fields. That was what we said institutions do and what programs they offer as an institutional choice. So, those five things together allowed us to come up with a score from zero to four. We call anything above the average rural serving. This is how we figured out to marry them under one metric that works well for all rather than trying to figure out the different types of institutions that do other things.

Drumm McNaughton 11:23
The bottom line with this is trying to figure out what works and what doesn't, is that correct?

Andrew Koricich 11:29
Because we have all these questions about who they even are, it's just to help people like journalists find the list of rural-serving institutions to write stories about. The hope is that this leads us to see best practices and more institutions sharing what they're doing with other rural-serving institutions and more researchers. You can spend so much time spinning your wheels doing research. For rural scholars, there's so much time spent just adjudicating what is rural. So much work is lost by people who never get past that. We've done that work now. We have this framework. Now, go figure out the things you wanted to figure out, which wasn't what definition of rural is right. It's hopefully greasing those skids.

Drumm McNaughton 12:20
That makes sense. In your research and being at Appalachian State, which, by definition, is a rural-serving institution, you found many good things these institutions are doing and their challenges. Let's get started with the challenges because, if we look at those, we'll be able to see what best practices are, what rural-serving institutions can do, and what some of the urban land-grant institutions can take from these best practices.

Andrew Koricich 12:57
Yeah. A significant challenge for rural-serving institutions is financial constraints. One thing that's come through in this project is that rural-located or rural-serving institutions have resource disparities with their peers in cities and suburbs. These institutions on the public side are more dependent on state appropriations. But they're getting fewer appropriations per student.

Depending on how state-funding models are set up, they create winners and losers just by what they do. But many times, the metrics don't work as well for smaller rural institutions because they'll primarily focus on enrollment growth and other metrics that are constrained in rural places with fewer amenities compared to big cities. How you attract people there is going to function differently.

It also comes out with fellow philanthropic giving. People are not donating to rural-serving colleges as they do to the larger and more urban institutions. This happens with federal grant-making. These institutions are not equal beneficiaries of competitive federal grants. This becomes a real long-term capacity-building and stratification issue

because of F&A [Facilities & Administrative] and indirect costs. Therefore, you already have pretty wealthy institutions collecting big, fat F&A dollars off of federal money. By being left out, rural-serving institutions are losing important capacity building because reviewers from federal agencies don't understand these colleges.

There are questions about if they believe that the institutional home can carry this out, reviewers will go off what they know about these kinds of institutions, which may not be accurate. So, the funding stacks in a lot of different ways.

Drumm McNaughton 14:47
Yeah, and just so the listeners know, what is F&A?

Andrew Koricich 14:51
Facilities & Administrative. That's the extra cost for what the university already puts out for. That's their way of recouping some of that when they get grants.

Drumm McNaughton 14:59
Unless you're exclusively a commuter campus, that becomes very difficult for housing and all those things. What we see, too, is that a lot of the mergers and closures are happening in rural settings because of these funding and enrollment issues.

Andrew Koricich 15:20
Yes, and whenever you have systems or legislatures trying to make these decisions who don't understand the rural context and the challenges they face, they look like they're the ones ripe for mergers or closures because they tend to be smaller. But that's because the communities they serve are smaller. It's not a sign that they're failing. We wouldn't expect to have a 40,000-student university in a community that only has 2,000 people in it.

Drumm McNaughton
Oh, come on!

Andrew Koricich
We can hope, right? We can always dream.

Drumm McNaughton 15:52
But the rural folks don't want that many people.

Andrew Koricich 15:56
Right! That fundamentally changes the community. Whenever we see these things that system leaders are looking at and where the source of the problem is, it's easy to lump it on some of these smaller institutions. But whenever you look at a whole system, there's no way it's just the rural-serving institutions causing structural financial problems within systems. That's what I think is tricky with this. Also, because these institutions are smaller and in smaller areas, they tend to have less political weight in state capitals.

Even here in North Carolina, how many people do you think are from Western Carolina University in Raleigh? Probably not many compared to Duke, NC State, and Chapel Hill. This happens in Texas, right? UT Austin and A&M are the Texas legislature in many ways. It's the people who understand the institutions they went to. Still, we don't have enough representation from rural-serving colleges who understand the uniqueness of that mission in legislatures and systems.

Drumm McNaughton 16:57
We're seeing this in multiple states. PASSHE [Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education] is a big poster child for this. But even recently, Vermont State merged three colleges into one to reduce costs. They said that they're not going to have any physical libraries. You and I chatted about this before. You'd never see this at the University of Vermont. But does it make sense? Faculty don't like it. But is it the right thing to do? I'm not there in a position to say yes or no.

Andrew Koricich 17:31
Again, some of this is the result of structural financial deficits. I read an article that, by merging its colleges, Vermont State has a $25 million structural deficit that they must reduce by about $5 million every couple of years to stay compliant. So, you have this president of this newly formed, combined university looking at where to cut costs. How did these institutions end up with these structural deficits? Some of it is state funding and the degree to which the states are or are not keeping up with their part of the compact for these institutions. Some of it is also having the proper oversight. How does this structural deficit develop over such a long period without the state legislature

saying this problem has been here and will only worsen? Let's do something now because what is a university without a library? It's such a fundamental shift. Students at the University of Vermont and many urban universities would not tolerate going to a college that doesn't have a physical library to access specific collections. It feels like these institutions are saying, “Here's what we can afford to give you, and be glad we can afford to give you them.”

Drumm McNaughton 18:51
I'm going to push back a little bit on that one. I don't think that's what it is. In reality, these closures don't happen overnight. They happen over the course of years. And you're right. The legislature needs to be looking at it more. But it's also a fundamental question for board governance. Are you looking forward by years, or are you going, “Unfortunately, you've got a lot of folks, especially public universities, appointed by the governor or legislature who have minimal experience in higher ed, if any?” We all know the tale. But the board, administration, and even the legislature have to look and go, “Okay. In three years, it looks like we'll have enrollment issues because of the demographic cliff. So, what do we need to do to ensure we're offering the programs right now.” You know the drill. I’m preaching to the choir.

Andrew Koricich 19:53
Yeah, and some of it is right. We have to have boards that are focused on the right thing. Some of the challenges of how boards are appointed, like what we see in Florida, is that their purpose is to be political. And that's tricky because whenever you have too many alumni, they see the university as this place they love. They can't but see it objectively. When it’s all political appointees, they see it as a political tool rather than as an engine for a region or state. So, you get all these conflicting purposes that you miss things because you're focused on this or that.

But the reality is that it is also the board's job to be aware of financial problems and to push them back down to the president or chancellor before it gets to the legislature. Boards are busy people. But financial oversight will become an increasingly important role for them and another layer of checks and balances.

Drumm McNaughton 20:55
You're absolutely right, and that goes back to something we discussed. With rural-serving institutions, we need to go back to the purpose of higher education. It’s a public

good. It helps support the economic development of the region or state. The metrics need to differ from what you have for urban-serving institutions or flagships. I don't think that happens, however.

Andrew Koricich 21:30
No, it doesn't. Over a period of decades, we've been shrinking higher ed appropriations. We've also moved towards the return on investment, with cost-benefit analysis being the goal and ensuring everything we get is the maximum return. There's always more benefit than cost. Especially on the public side of things, it's a public service. We don't expect K-12 schools to make money. That's not the point. But we're somehow expecting public colleges to demonstrate that they're making more than they cost. In some markets and regions, that works. But in small places where your public, rural-serving, regional schools maybe only have 1,000 students, that's a very different set of constraints on what you can and can't do as an institution and how much things cost.

It, therefore, does come back to the purpose of higher ed. Is it actually to provide an education, or is it to turn public colleges into for-profit corporations? If it's actually about giving access to all residents and communities that need it, then we have to understand that some of these colleges will not look like money-makers. But we have to abandon that as their purpose.

Drumm McNaughton 22:45
I'm going to throw in a wild card here. Nobody likes taxes. But we've cut back taxes so much that we have to cut back the budget in other areas, and education is just one of those things we'll cut back. You can look at tax cuts versus funding for higher education and student debt. It's all one package. But we're not going to go there today.

Andrew Koricich 23:16
Unless you want to give me three more episodes.

Drumm McNaughton 23:19
Well, we're having a great time here. That's a possibility. But we're not going to talk about those. So, tell me. What is it that rural-serving institutions can do to change this? We're seeing some of the most significant declines in enrollment in rural-serving institutions, the RSI guys.

Andrew Koricich 23:43
We have to stop wishing for a reality that will never come and accept what's before us. Wishing, hoping, and praying that we'll get larger high school graduating cohorts isn't going to cut it. The reality is that we have to think differently about who our students will be going forward. Who are the students who need to be served and can help us fill seats? And for many community colleges and regional public schools, broad access is their mission. It is to serve the underserved. So, some of this is finding adult students who never started post-secondary or who started and dropped out two courses shy of a degree. They will be the ones we need because there is not a state in this country that has 100% of people who need a post-secondary credential holding them, which means there are students out there for us to serve. They're just harder to get in the door.

This is also true for underrepresented minorities. As we look at racial shifts, colleges can't afford to ignore Latino populations and the like because they're growing. But these are also populations that they'll remember if you treated them poorly. We see this with minorities and banks where these businesses did all kinds of nefarious things over the years. There's a distrust, and institutions can't foster distrust among adult learners, racial minorities, and others. They have to build a bigger tent to survive in the future. Everyone has to be welcome.

Drumm McNaughton 25:20
Yeah. We're running out of enrolling the most accessible students, and it will only get worse with the enrollment cliff, as I like to call it. But folks are calling it the demographic cliff at this point. Only 40% of all people enroll in college, so there are many more there. But the support you have to put in place for first-generation and other students who have not had any college experience or have been living vicariously through their parents' experience, which obviously adds more costs.

Andrew Koricich 25:55
Right? Then it snowballs, right? If you don't do those things and those students drop out, they underperform, which hits you on performance funding metrics. If you're going to serve these students, you have to do it well. Otherwise, these institutions are going to be penalized for even trying.

Drumm McNaughton 26:12
We also talked about a growth mindset. Tell us a little more about that.

Andrew Koricich 26:19
There was an opinion piece in *The Chronicle* last year called "the Cult of Growth." It talked about the problem of institutional and system leaders and legislators thinking about growth for the sake of growth, where growth is the goal rather than seeing growth as an offshoot of doing well.

What's really challenging is that there's nothing to say that bigger is better in higher ed. There's nothing to say that a 50,000-student university delivers a qualitatively better education than a 5,000-student university. They're just different. But we always want to get to better economies of scale, more students in classrooms, and lower costs to educate the student per student by backing fewer sections, for example.

But the problem is that rural-serving institutions are usually located in regions that will never see population growth again. And as place-based institutions, their enrollment fortunes rise and fall with the population of the regions they serve. So, if we're saying you must grow for us to see whether you're doing well and you're in a region that's just losing population, the institution will be penalized for something completely out of their control. Instead, we have to consider the right size to be sustainable.

Maybe for some, bigger can sometimes be better. But for others, it's about saying we have to be smaller than we've been. We'll never be able to sustain operations the way we have. But we also can't let it languish until it becomes an emergency, forcing us to close or merge colleges or slashing 3,000 programs at a time. It's all about smart shrinking. How do we do it purposefully and thoughtfully over time rather than viewing it as the sky is falling? It doesn't have to be drastic.

Drumm McNaughton 28:03
It takes a holistic perspective. If you can look at it from a system perspective, what does this college or university need here? What are the primary employment job areas, etc.? It has to be smart growth. But growth for growth's sake doesn't make sense. I know one university in Texas, which will remain nameless, that was bragging, "We had over 10,000 applications for 1,500 freshmen seats." That's really great for them. But many folks are going to get disappointed. What is the right number of students for your

institution? We're seeing far more institutions saying, “This is our enrollment. This is what's optimum for us.”

I know multiple universities that admitted so many freshmen that they had to go out and contract with local hotels for dorms, or they kicked all the upperclassmen out. Folks can't afford it because these college towns' housing is very expensive.

Andrew Koricich 29:19
This is happening here in Boone around Appalachian State. We've had a lot of growth. There are a lot of good things that come along with that. But it's put many housing tensions in place because the state is not authorizing raises for state system employees. But it's getting expensive around here, especially after the pandemic, because we have a national park, the Blue Ridge Parkway, 15 minutes away. It's the farthest south you can go skiing on the east coast, and it's cooler and less humid than the low country. So, everybody's scrambling to get here while the university is growing and trying to hire people. But we have employees who can't afford to live here. They live 40 minutes or even two hours away. Sometimes they have to do a mix of remote and in-person. That's a problem.

Drumm McNaughton 30:06
So, to keep costs down, systems should try to force collaboration between rural-serving institutions. Maybe there’s only one within 200 miles? The online experience and going hybrid seem like good solutions.

Andrew Koricich 30:32
Yeah, and the important way to think about online and hybrid education is that it is *part* of the solution. It’s not a silver bullet. Everyone isn’t as comfortable with this technology, or some need in-person interaction. Institutions have to think purposefully about the right mix because there’s still a need for physical campuses. But as you're thinking about the right programs to offer and your student market for your programs, some of them may not make sense as an in-person residential program. But if you're thinking about web development, for example, there's huge growth potential, and they don't have to actually be here for all of it. Then you can figure out the right mix.

As you said, it is thinking holistically about what's actually happening, and some programs are no longer viable. Some programs would be viable if we invested in them

because we know they have growth potential. But, at a certain point, you must have those tough conversations. If there isn't a vault of money for investing in one, we may have to divest from another. It's about being proactive and transparent with folks as that's happening.

Drumm McNaughton 31:48
This is something boards and administrations need to examine, as well as what programs are and aren't performing. Are you teaching the right subjects in terms of what your local industries are? What do people do? Is it entrepreneurship or agronomy? Is this critical?

Andrew Koricich 32:10
Yes. One thing that I would caution against is when we think about the liberal arts and humanities as easy punching bags. People always say it's like underwater basket weaving. But whenever we see courses like languages getting cut, we have to remember that while the liberal arts isn't a professional preparation program, there are many skills that you learn through a liberal arts education that can actually make you even more adaptable than somebody like me who learned software development. Let's say the software crashed. I'm trained to do primarily one thing, whereas folks in liberal arts are trained to think differently about many things and learn different subjects. We need to remember that the liberal arts are also part of what communities need, even if it's not about workforce development and even if it's good for no other reason than just enriching and bringing pro-cultural programming to communities. It's good for people to have a well-rounded education.

Drumm McNaughton 33:14
It brings to mind the study that AAC, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, does every couple of years about what employers need. The number one skill for teamwork is critical thinking—the ability to analyze data and draw conclusions. These are all things that you can get from not only a STEM background but mainly from a liberal arts education.

Andrew Koricich 33:41
Yes, and even companies that are primarily STEM companies need non-STEM employees. You still have marketing, human resources, and staff development that are

not the STEM people. We also have to remember that you might have an industry focused on one thing, but they still employ a wide range of people across skill sets.

Drumm McNaughton 34:02
This is something that you and I were talking very passionately about. Boards have to hire administrators who understand and are passionate about rural-serving institutions. There are a lot of turnovers that happen. Somebody will take a position at a rural-serving university, and two years later, they've gone to a larger university. It can't be a stepping stone. You have to hire people who want to be there and will stay.

Andrew Koricich 34:37
Yes. These institutions are looked at as a springboard to something better. You finally go from provost or dean to having president or chancellor in your title, which makes the next president or chancellor position easier. Meanwhile, you and I are discussing the need to be proactive and respond to things years before they become an emergency. How should institutions respond to that if they lose presidents every three years? There's just no long-range planning, vision, diagnostics, or triage that happens when administration keeps turning over.

This even happened at a small, passionate school in my hometown. Growing up, there were two presidents over a multi-decade period. They were there for a very, very long time. But then, since that second left, they went through about seven presidents in 10 years between permanence and interims. That is part of why that institution has had such a challenging run with enrollment, programming, and advocacy for the legislature. The legislature never talks to the same person for more than a year or two at a time. That's harmful.

If anyone listening is thinking about doing this themselves, don't do it. These institutions don't deserve to be used to launch presidential careers. They deserve presidents who value their mission, their students, and who understand these can be great places if we commit to them.

Drumm McNaughton 36:04
One of my good friends is a former president of Maryland College Park and Ohio State and was then chancellor. He was at Maryland for ten years. He started as a faculty

member in the math department and moved up the ranks. Oh, I'm sorry, *the* Ohio State University.

Andrew Koricich 36:26
You don't want emails about it.

Drumm McNaughton 36:29
Oh, no, trust me. He was there for four years and then returned to Maryland as the systemwide chancellor. You don't see that longevity there. It's one step to the next. The college president's role results in high burnout. It's probably the second most challenging CEO role in America, behind that of a medical facility. So, you have to get somebody who wants to stay there and is passionate about rural-serving institutions.

Andrew Koricich 36:59
Yeah, and that also underscores what we discussed earlier: the importance of having the right board members in place for the right reasons. It can't just be about politically popular presidents but what is best for the institution. Also, to the point about burnout, boards have a significant role in increasing or reducing burnout and everything else on presidents and chancellors. You look at the poor folks at North Idaho College. The board has been an unmitigated disaster for a while and has cycled through presidents. There's all kinds of turmoil between them, the legislature, and the governor's office. That's horrible for a rural-serving college to have that. So, we need boards to make it a job worth taking and not make it so much more difficult than it already is

Drumm McNaughton 37:54
I'm going to steal a line from one of my favorite movies: "You may think that, but I possibly could not say that."

Andrew Koricich 38:02
Yes, exactly. I'm happy to be the mouthpiece on that one. It's not just a rural problem, however. We see that across settings. Boards are supposed to be a shield for the president. They're supposed to filter some of it. When that starts to break down, you're just grinding people out of that job so fast.

Drumm McNaughton 38:25

It can be very, very difficult. And you're right. The board has a big part in that. I can't believe how fast this time went. But I think we both figured it was going to be like that. Andrew, what are three takeaways for university presidents, boards, and system leaders?

Andrew Koricich 38:44
One is that rural communities are no less deserving than cities and suburbs. They have robust, healthy, stable institutions that will serve their communities well into the future. We have to be committed to that. We have to also stop pushing these institutions into being more like flagships or search universities and recognize that the teaching and service mission is really important to these colleges. It's really how they developed over time. That is a part of the enrollment growth piece, too. We have to figure out what's right for that place instead of pushing them to be something else they may never actually be.

Like we were saying about the right way to hire senior administrators, we need to apply this to faculty and consider how we talk about these jobs. People believe that people like me ended up here because I couldn't be anywhere else. It's foreign to them that we choose to be in places like this. But we have wonderful careers here. I'm leading a research center at a rural-serving, regional, public institution. I've had a great career here, and many people have great careers here. It's about finding people who actually see the potential of the career rather than saying, "I'll be here until I can find something better." We have to think about respecting the uniqueness of the mission and the hiring processes. That's what I'd say are three big ones.

Drumm McNaughton 40:11
Thank you. Those are great. Andrew, what's next for you?

Andrew Koricich 40:14
Well, we have a lot of work that we're planning, including how institutions respond to demographic and population changes and how we can do them more effectively and be more proactive. We're also thinking about institutional financial stratification, especially from funding agencies and the like, and starting to tell more of these stories about these institutions. Most of the time, the focus is on big, well-known institutions. We want to tell the fascinating stories happening at rural-serving institutions nationwide.

Drumm McNaughton 40:51
That's great. We can certainly hope that we won't get more stories like North Idaho College.

Andrew Koricich
I hope not.

Drumm McNaughton
We don't want to publicize the negative aspects of rural-serving colleges.

Andrew Koricich 41:04
That's right. It feeds negative stereotypes that are absolutely not true at so many of these places. It's unfair that the attention gets projected elsewhere.

Drumm McNaughton 41:14
It is. Well, Andrew, thank you so much for being on the program. I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation. I look forward to the next time we get a chance to talk.

Andrew Koricich 41:23
Thank you so much, Drumm. I really appreciate it.

Drumm McNaughton 41:25
Take care. Thanks for listening today. And a special thank you to our guest Dr. Andrew Koricich, executive director of the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges, for sharing his knowledge on RSIs and the lessons he's learned that can apply to all higher ed institutions. Our next guest is Elliot Felix, CEO of Brightspots Strategy. Elliot and his team have significantly impacted institutions' enrollment and retention. Elliot will join us to talk about how higher ed institutions can improve their enrollment retention and graduation rates by redesigning the student experience for today's students.

42:13
Changing Higher Ed is a production of the Change Leader, a consultancy committed to transforming higher ed institutions. Find more information about this topic and show

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