

# EQUITY IN ACTION

Pathways Research, Strategy, and Practice Brief



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## **Rural Serving Community Colleges:**

*The Cornerstones for Promoting  
Equity in Postsecondary Education  
Enrollment, Retention, and Attainment*

Darris R. Means, Clemson University

Rachael M. Stowe, University of Pittsburgh




University of  
**Pittsburgh**

School of  
Education

# ABOUT THE SERIES

The Equity in Action Research and Strategy Brief Series aims to explore and feature key issues, plans for action, and practices that advance and inclusion within P-20 education. These briefs seek to address persistent disparities in student opportunities and outcomes. By synthesizing current research, examining policy implications, and highlighting successful interventions, the series intends to provide educators, policymakers, and stakeholders with actionable insights to create more equitable learning environments. This series is designed to provide insights and guidance on developing, enhancing, and sustaining pathways that support students' transitions across educational tiers. Strengthen partnerships among schools, colleges, employers, and community organizations to create cohesive, culturally responsive pathways for students.





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# Rural-Serving Community Colleges:

## *The Cornerstones for Promoting Equity in Postsecondary Education Enrollment, Retention, and Attainment*

Darris R. Means, Clemson University

Rachael M. Stowe, University of Pittsburgh



In 2009, President Barack Obama called upon national, state, postsecondary education and secondary education, and workforce leaders in the United States to support increasing the postsecondary attainment rate from 40% to 60% for adults between the ages of 25 and 34, positioning the United States to be more economically competitive and to ensure an informed “vibrant democratic society” (Fry, 2017; Kanter et al., 2011, p. 9; Jones, 2023; Marcus, 2019; Schmitt-Wilson & Byun, 2022; Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015). President Obama specifically focused on community colleges as critical higher education institutions that could help achieve the postsecondary education attainment goal (Marcus, 2019). While there has been a commitment by national, state, postsecondary and secondary education, and workforce leaders to increase the postsecondary attainment rate, the United States has fallen short of the 60% goal (Jones, 2023; Lumina Foundation, n.d.).

As of 2021, the postsecondary education attainment rate in the United States is 53.7%, which includes certificates, associate degrees, bachelor’s degrees, and graduate or professional degrees (Lumina Foundation, n.d.). Policymakers, educational leaders, researchers, and journalists have pointed to reduction in state funding for postsecondary education, postsecondary education costs and affordability, and the questioning of the value of postsecondary education as culprits that are obstructing an increase in postsecondary education attainment rates (Kanter et al., 2011; Marcus, 2019; Rhoades, 2023). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated postsecondary education attainment challenges with the United States experiencing a 15% decline in total undergraduate enrollment, and, between fall 2010 and fall 2021, 2-year institutions experienced a 39% decline in enrollment (Irwin et al., 2023).

Researchers have called for a need to pay attention to how social class and classism and race and racism lead to postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and attainment inequities in the United States (Means & Kniess, 2023; Palmer & Walker, 2023; Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015). However, how geographical context and place-based inequities shape and limit postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and attainment have received considerably less attention and even less attention has been paid to how place-based inequities intersect with racism, classism, and other forms of oppression to shape and limit postsecondary education opportunity (Dache-Gerbino, 2017, 2018; Hillman, 2016; Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Klasik et al., 2018; Turley, 2009). In particular, researchers have raised alarms about how place-based inequities in rural geographical locales limit postsecondary education opportunity for rural students, leading rural students and residents to be less likely to enroll, persist, and graduate from postsecondary education institutions (Byun et al., 2012b; Byun et al., 2015; Cain & Smith, 2020; Koricich et al., 2018; Schmitt-Wilson & Byun, 2022; Wells et al., 2019; Wells et al., 2023; Whiteside, 2021). Additionally, the intersection of race and racism and social class and classism amplifies inequitable postsecondary education opportunities for rural students from poor and working-class backgrounds and rural Students of Color (Ardoin, 2018; Ardoin & McNamee, 2021; Byun et al., 2012a; Cain & Smith, 2020; Chambers & Crumb, 2021; Irvin et al., 2016; Means et al., 2016; Means & Sansone, 2022; Williams et al., 2022).

### **Purpose of the Research-to-Practice Brief**

In this research-to-practice brief, we examine how rural geographical context and place-based inequities at the intersection of social class classism and race and racism shape and limit postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and attainment for rural students. We specifically center rural-serving community colleges (RSCCs) as cornerstones for promoting equity in postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and attainment for rural students. Koricich and colleagues (2022) differentiated between rural-located institutions and rural-serving institutions, arguing for the need to understand the postsecondary education landscape for institutions that are in rural areas and institutions outside of rural areas that serve rural communities. Koricich and colleagues (2022) developed a mathematical index based on population size of the institution's county, percentage of the institution's county and adjacent counties that are considered rural, proximity to metropolitan area, and percent of degree conferred in specific fields (e.g., agriculture, parks and recreation). Based on this mathematical index, Koricich and colleagues (2022) identified a total of 1,087 rural-serving institutions; of the 1,087 institutions, 444 are two-year public institutions and eight are two-year private institutions.

We focus on RSCCs as critical cornerstones for promoting equity in postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and attainment for two reasons. First, over half of community colleges are rural-serving



institutions (Koricich et al., 2022). However, rural-serving institutions tend to have fewer available resources, such as certificate and degree programs, enrichment programs, and experiential learning opportunities, and “more than two-thirds of the institutions located in persistent poverty counties are [rural-serving institutions]” (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Koricich et al., 2022, p. 5). Second, Byun et al. (2016) found in a nationwide sample of over 2,000 rural students that more than half of rural students enroll in two-year institutions initially with close to two-thirds of rural students accessing two-year colleges at some point in their educational trajectory. This may be due to many rural areas across the United States being considered education deserts, “places across the country where no colleges are located or where the options are scarce” and where community colleges are often the only geographically accessible institutions (Hillman, 2016, p. 988; Hillman & Weichman, 2016). Given that RSCCs may be the postsecondary education access point for many rural students, they serve as critical institutions that can also support student transfer and bachelor-degree attainment for rural students. In this research-to-practice brief we begin with a brief review of literature related to RSCCs; highlight several promising practices that rural-serving institutions or non-profit organizations have instituted to increase postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and graduation; and offer implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and research.

## **Brief Review of Rural-Serving Community Colleges**

Prior research has determined several factors influence enrollment, retention, and degree completion amongst RSCC students, including postsecondary education costs and affordability, sense of belonging, and commitment to serve their local communities (Cuellar & Gándara, 2021; Harmon et al., 2022; Harris III et al., 2015; Hicks et al., 2014; Hlinka, 2015; Perrakis, 2008; Puente et al., 2023; Urias & Wood, 2014; Watson, 2009; Wood & Williams, 2013; Yang & Venezia, 2020).

## **Financial Aid and College Affordability**

Researchers have found that reduced school cost and the wide availability of financial aid increases student enrollment in and completion of RSCC programs (Hicks et al., 2014; Yang & Venezia, 2020). Rural community college students, compared to any other student group, are the most aided by federal programs, including Pell Grant distributions (Hicks et al., 2014). Receiving aid such as Pell Grants for a longer period has been linked to an increased likelihood of graduation, with Women of Color benefitting the most (Hicks et al., 2014). Yang and Venezia (2020) also found that low-income community college students who simply completed the FAFSA had 122% higher degree persistence rates than their peers who did not. Though there are many financial aid opportunities for students in RSCCs, findings from Yang and Venezia (2020) also suggest that rural community college students have more debt than other community college subgroups, which may be linked to low FAFSA completion rates amongst first-generation rural college students.





### **Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging is critical to the retention of students in RSCCs, especially for Students of Color (Cuellar & Gándara, 2021; Garrett et al., 2021; Harmon et al., 2022; Harris III et al., 2015; Hlinka, 2017; Perrakis, 2008; Puente et al., 2023; Urias & Wood, 2014; Watson, 2009; Wood & Williams, 2013). Harmon and colleagues (2022) and Hlinka (2017) also found that rural community colleges integrate regional values, like senses of place, time, and work, into their campus communities, "mirror[ing] supportive push of family and community" to degree completion (p. 155). However, research by Garrett and colleagues (2021) suggests that feelings of isolation are often perpetuated by fewer faculty members of color, and the reinforcement of "colorblind ideologies, meritocracy, and suspicion regarding curricular/pedagogical philosophies which center issues of race and power" (p. 115). To enhance students' sense of belonging, RSCCs can support students in building responsive relationships with mentors with similar identities and connecting with organizations and groups focused on Students of Color on campuses (Hlinka, 2017; Cuellar & Gándara, 2021).

### **Commitment to Give Back to Rural Communities**

Students' ability to gain social mobility and enhance rural community life is also a strong determinant for choosing RSCCs over other higher education institutions (Cuellar & Gándara, 2021; Harmon et al., 2022; Hlinka et al., 2015; Puente et al., 2023; Yang & Venezia, 2020). After degree completion, rural students often aim to "transform the inequities and injustices that their family and community members face" (Puente et al., 2023, p. 673) and "improve the quality of life in the region" (Hlinka et al., 2015, p. 9). Research by Harmon and colleagues (2022, p. 323) found that rural areas furthest from major metropolitan areas with an "established, comprehensive community college" saw the greatest economic benefits, through what Yang and Venezia (2020) identified as degree programs aligned to rural workforce needs, enhancing the local economy and uplifting social mobility goals for community members. RSCCs can help support rural students' goals by engaging in consistent career counseling that is fine-tuned to student interests and backgrounds (Hlinka et al., 2015).

### **Practices that Support Postsecondary Education Enrollment, Persistence, and Graduation of Students at Rural-Serving Community Colleges**

RSCCs from different regions across the U.S. have shown promise in implementing programs that increase enrollment, retention, and degree completion. Southeastern Community College located in Columbus County, North Carolina is most notable for its programs targeting student success for racially minoritized students (Carver et al., 2022; Southeastern Community College, 2023; Torres & Viterito, 2008). As part of their Quality Enhancement Plan to provide support for students from enrollment to degree completion, the college has implemented the Minority Mentor program, matching Black men students to community mentors to “create a support system for minority males who often felt left out or outnumbered” (Southeastern Community College, n.d.; Torres & Viterito, p. 25). In addition, the Male Minority Grant targets Columbus County racially minoritized men, who currently enroll in higher education at lower rates than other race and gender groups locally and statewide, by reducing barriers to enrollment, providing support services including academic and career advising, and increasing the percentage of high schoolers earning college credit (Southeastern Community College, n.d.).

Rural-serving community colleges have also focused on economic and community development in the region, which has direct implications for postsecondary education outcomes. Sitting Bull College—located on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation that serves both North and South Dakota—was

supported by the Ford Foundation Rural Community College Initiative in the creation of the Tribal Business Information Center and Equity Loan Fund (Torres & Viterito, 2008). These programs “contribute to a growing reservation economy by assisting in the creation, development and/or expansion of small business” through entrepreneurial workshops, a business incubator, and small business loans up to \$50,000 (Sitting Bull College, n.d., para. 1; Sitting Bull College Entrepreneurial Center, n.d.; Torres & Viterito, 2008). Sitting Bull College also created a college-affiliated construction company, creating employment opportunities and reducing job exodus in students’ home regions, while increasing the economic capital of the reservation (Torres & Viterito, 2008).

Non-profit organizations have also played a role in increasing postsecondary education opportunity for rural students. For example, The Get2College program aims to increase FAFSA completion rates across rural Mississippi through FAFSA Days, which provide free one-on-one financial aid counseling appointments and assistance in the completion of applications (Kellogg et al., 2020). Get2College has expanded the program through partnerships with local rural community colleges to increase the number of event days and increase FAFSA application completion rates (Kellogg et al., 2020). These partnerships resulted in higher annual completion rates for Mississippi high school graduates and, in 2019, the third-highest state FAFSA completion rate in the nation (Kellogg et al., 2020).



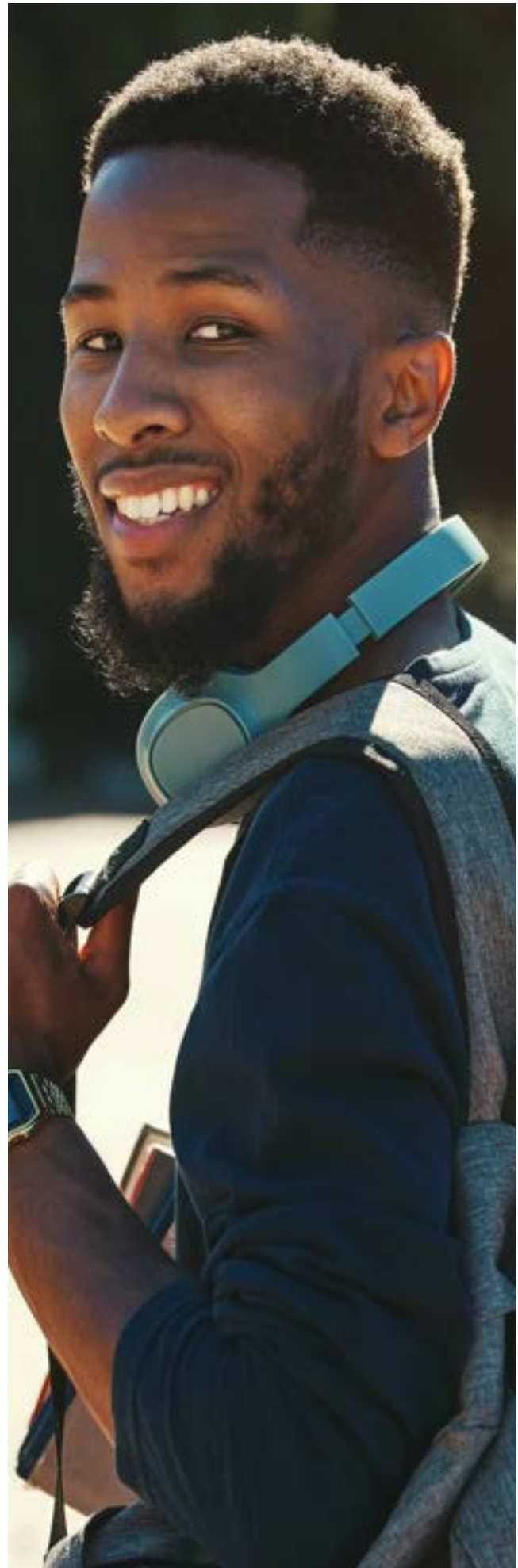
## **Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Research**

We offer several recommendations that can inform policy, practice, and research to support RSCCs and students who attend these institutions.

### **Financial Considerations**

RSCCs often must navigate financial constraints that limit their ability to offer programs, services, and resources that support postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and attainment of rural students (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Koricich et al., 2022). Given that over half of community colleges are RSCCs and most rural students will attend community colleges at some point in their educational career (Byun et al., 2016; Koricich et al., 2022), local and state governments should consider how their funding formulas for community colleges may support and/or hinder postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and attainment. For RSCCs to be an incubator for postsecondary education equity, they need resources that can support recruitment, retention, and student transfer.

Students at RSCCs often must navigate postsecondary education affordability and costs concerns, including having more debt compared to other community college students (Hicks et al., 2014; Yang & Venezia, 2020). These postsecondary education affordability and cost concerns lead to inequities in postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and attainment for rural students. Federal and state policymakers need to identify ways to decrease students' reliance on loans



to pursue postsecondary education and how to expand access to financial aid opportunities. This is particularly critical for community colleges that are often seen as access points for students of all ages to pursue postsecondary education.

### **Diversity, Sense of Belonging, and Asset-Based Approaches**

Students at RSCCs are not a monolith and represent diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other social identities. Thus, students at RSCCs have differing experiences navigating forms of oppression, including racism, classism, ableism, and sexism, which impacts their postsecondary education retention and graduation and sense of belonging on their campuses. Researchers studying RSCCs should recognize the diversity of rural students and diversity of institutions. Additionally, practitioners at RSCCs should consider how their programs and services recognize the diversity of students, as well as assess the enrollment, retention, and attainment rates across student demographics to understand if programs, policies, and practices may limit postsecondary education opportunity for various student populations on the campus.

RSCCs and students who attend these institutions have rich assets. For example, RSCCs often support rural workforce needs and support the social and economic mobility of the communities in which they reside (Yang & Venezia, 2020). While postsecondary education attainment has increasingly been viewed as a private good

that only benefits individuals (Rhoades, 2023), federal and state policymakers must recognize how RSCCs and other rural-serving institutions “are vital players in human infrastructure and community well-being” (Koricich et al., 2022, p. 7). Thus, federal and state policymakers should consider how to better invest in these institutions to ensure they continue to serve rural students and the rural communities in which they serve. Additionally, some rural students desire to earn a postsecondary degree so they can give back to their communities and families (Hlinka et al., 2015; Means, 2019; Puente et al., 2023). Practitioners at RSCCs should explore and build upon experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, service learning, and cooperative learning, that provide students the opportunity to serve their local communities.

### **Conclusion**

RSCCs play a critical role in promoting equity in the United States by providing postsecondary education, social, and economic opportunities in rural regions. RSCCs are vital for supporting postsecondary education enrollment, attainment, and transfer for rural students. However, policymakers and educational leaders must rethink how they support RSCCs so they can serve as cornerstones for advancing postsecondary education opportunity for rural students. Policymakers and educational leaders strengthening their support of RSCCs and the students who attend these institutions could lead to transformative postsecondary education opportunities that better serve rural communities across the United States.

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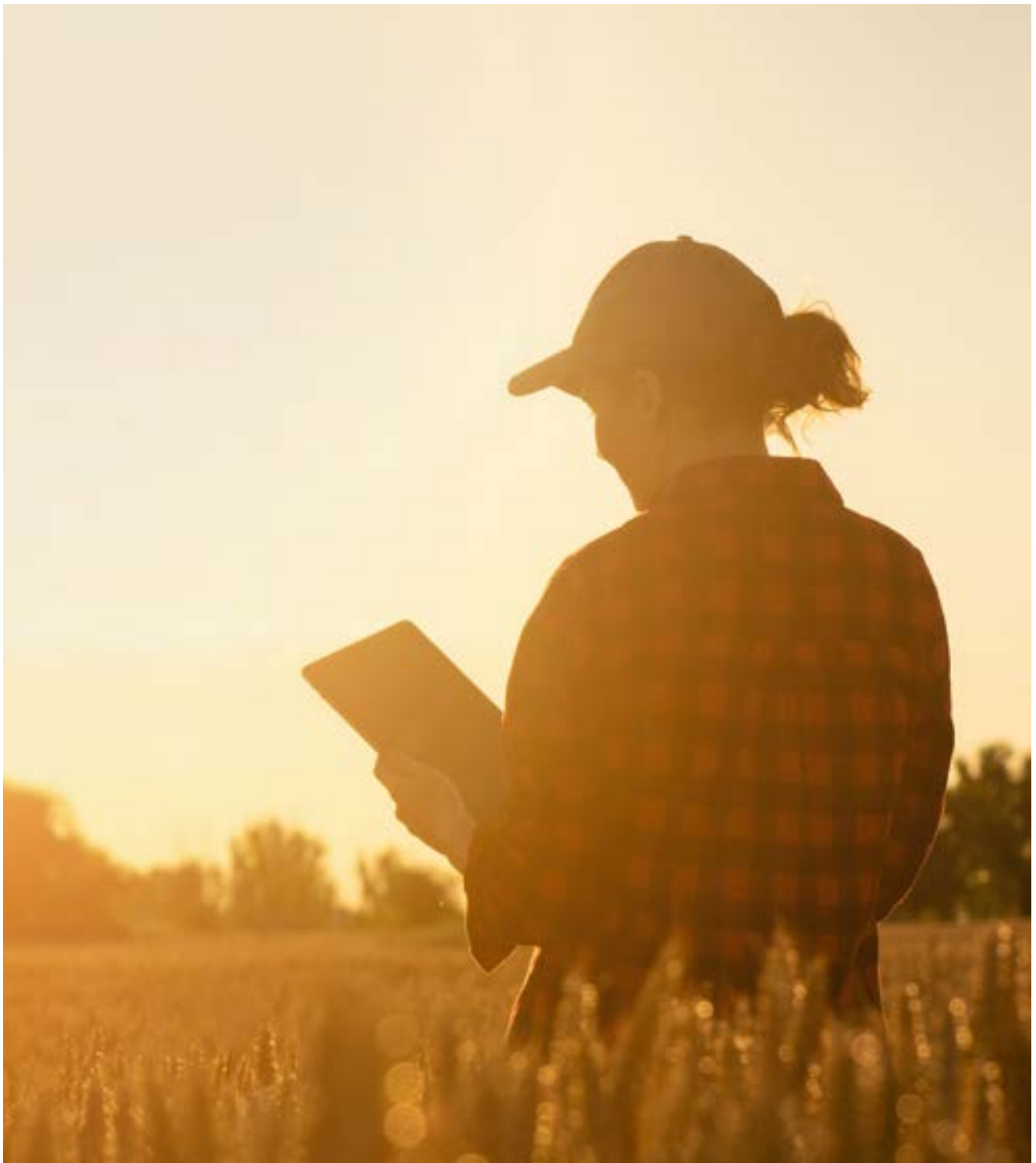
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