



**Western Illinois  
University**

**HIGHER EDUCATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ILLINOIS  
IBHE BOARD MEETING—MARCH 13, 2024**

**Chris Merrett, PhD, Dean for Innovation and Economic Development  
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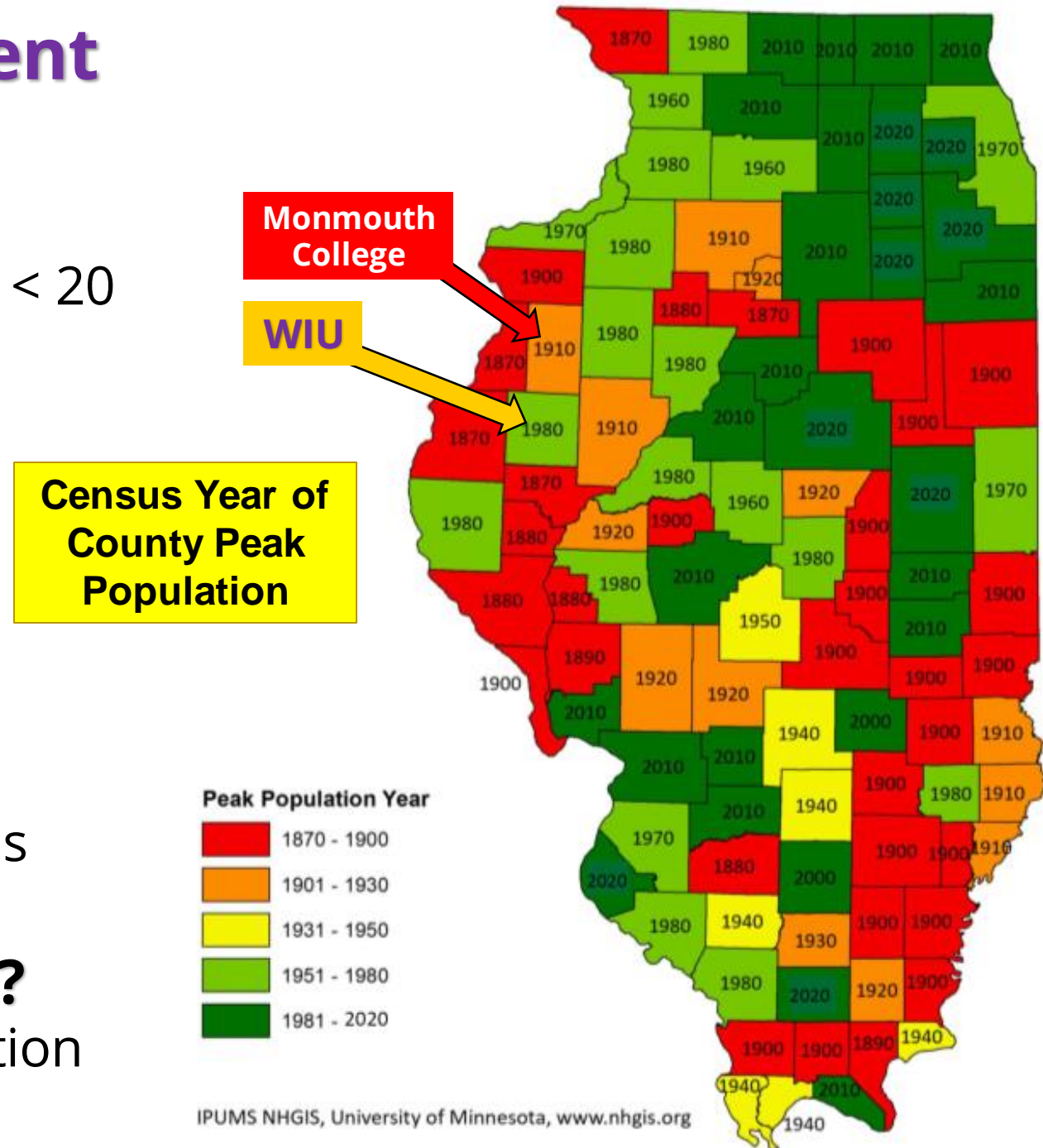
# Context for Rural Development

- **Rural community challenges:**

- Decades of rural depopulation
- Fastest shrinking age cohort: rural < 20
- Youth outmigration
- Aging population
- Digital divide is real
- Declining rural tax base
- Health care access
- Educational access
- Main Street Economy
- Loss of anchor institutions
- Workforce development challenges
- **“Psychology of Decline”**

- **Strategies for Farm Belt Places?**

- Macroscale forces drive depopulation
- How can higher education help?



The New York Times

# Getting Real About Rural America

Nobody knows how to reverse the heartland's decline.



Politically, rural America is increasingly a world apart. Maddie McGarvey for The New York Times

March 18, 2019



1859



By Paul Krugman  
Opinion Columnist



ECONOMY & BUSINESS

# If Your Town Is Failing, Just Go

By KEVIN D. WILLIAMSON | October 6, 2015 8:00 AM

NATIONAL  
REVIEW



Downtown Booneville, Ky., in 2012. (Mario Tama/Getty)

A prescription for impoverished communities

# Pushing Back Against the Negative Narrative

- Easy to point out rural **needs**. What about rural **assets**? **“ABCD”**
  - Confront pessimism and the underlying “psychology of decline”
  - IIRA at WIU has innovative programs that work at the local level
  - 35 years + 500 communities + great outcomes = Population still drops
- Innovative academic programs are necessary but insufficient to maintain the population and quality of life in rural places
  - Macroscale processes drive rural population decline
  - Need macroscale policy to help stabilize rural places
- Higher education can be part of the solution
  - Higher Education **is** economic development
  - State should treat students in the same way DCEO treats businesses
  - Funding equity rather than funding equality
  - More thoughts: [http://www.facibhe.org/documents/papers/IIRA\\_Intro\\_2023.pdf](http://www.facibhe.org/documents/papers/IIRA_Intro_2023.pdf)