



# What to Know About Rural Students and Their Challenges

## Who Are Rural Students?

While the term might conjure images of young, white, tractor-riding inhabitants of the Corn Belt, in reality, rural students are anything but homogenous. Whether they're Black students from the Deep South, Indigenous students from Alaska, or Latino/a students from states along the Mexican border, they bring a wide range of experiences and identities with them to campuses across the country.

Nicholas Hillman, a professor in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, notes that about 21 percent of white undergraduates nationwide are from rural places, along with roughly 7 percent of Black undergraduates, 6 percent of Latino/a undergraduates, and 30 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native undergraduates.

Part of the challenge of serving — and studying — this population is that the U.S. government, state governments, colleges, and researchers define

“rural” in different ways. The Economic Research Service in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for example, often [defines](#) rural counties as “nonmetropolitan” places, which may include “open countryside” and towns with fewer than 2,500 people. Yet the ERS has also developed “sub-county classifications that more accurately delineate different levels of rurality,” according to its website. Many academics who study rural students also look to more qualitative definitions, based on students’ descriptions of their backgrounds and self-conceptions.

“It’s hard to compare apples to apples when you have to spend so much time figuring out whether you’re talking about the same apples,” says Andrew Koricich, an associate professor of higher education at Appalachian State University. Moreover, as the Postsecondary National Policy Institute recently [noted](#), “there are data on rural postsecondary institutions,” but “there is a significant lack of information on students from rural areas.”



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Ascendium Education Group is a nonprofit organization focused on increasing the number of learners from low-income backgrounds that successfully earn a degree or credential. We do this through grantmaking focused on driving systemic change that results in more equitable outcomes for first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color, adult learners and veterans. Critical to our goals is bringing broad visibility to examples of what's working so that we can build awareness and urgency around promising solutions. For that reason, we're thrilled to support The Chronicle of Higher Education's The Different Voices of Student Success resource center. This vital online resource highlights innovation and ideas placing learners from all backgrounds on a path to success.

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What is clear is that higher ed needs to do a better job of reaching and supporting rural students. Some colleges have begun that work, focusing on them as a separate demographic and creating services and programs to meet their needs, but solutions aren't simple and are often elusive.

### **Why is it so important for higher ed to better support them?**

Rural students comprise a significant demographic that higher ed cannot afford to overlook. According to the Rural School and Community Trust's 50-state report on rural education, "[Why Rural Matters 2018-19: The Time Is Now](#)," nearly 7.5-million public-school students were enrolled in rural school districts during the 2016-17 school year — or nearly one of every seven students across the country.

And there's plenty of room for the higher-ed sector to improve. The vast majority of rural adults 25 or older have completed high school — [87 percent](#) as of 2019. The rate for rural high-school students going to college within a few months after graduation is 56 percent, the same as graduates from urban schools and not too far below the rate for suburban high-school students, 62 percent, according to a [report](#) from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

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And yet alongside those completion and enrollment rates is a statistic that underlines a bleaker outlook for rural students: Only 21 percent of rural adults have a bachelor's degree, compared to 35 percent of urban adults, [according to ERS](#).

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### **What challenges do they face?**

On their paths to college, rural students can encounter several barriers — beginning with the characteristics of their hometowns, which often have lower incomes and higher poverty rates as well as a lack of public services and philanthropic investment. Colleges have historically done a poor job of recruiting in rural communities, which are typically far away from their campuses. "When I was doing my dissertation research in rural schools about college access, I was there for six months and never saw a college recruiter," says Sonja Ardoin, an associate professor of higher education and student affairs at Clemson University. "The only recruiters there were military recruiters."

Physical distance also makes it harder for high-school students to go on campus visits, and college fairs may not exist in their areas. While more colleges are offering virtual tours and events, geographical challenges persist after students enroll. They may have to travel long distances just to commute to campus, or struggle to afford travel to and from their hometowns during academic breaks.

Then there are the issues associated with rural high schools, which are often underfunded and under-resourced. Their students will often "have less access to a broad range of AP courses, foreign languages, advanced STEM, and extracurricular activities," Koricich says. "Rural schools can't offer every kind of club

for this or that. The schools don't have enough teachers to advise those clubs, the funding for them, or enough students to make them viable. So rural students' college applications may reflect them having maximized every opportunity available in their communities but still seem to pale in comparison to the applications of students who went to wealthy, suburban high schools outside of large cities." Moreover, college counseling at rural high schools is usually limited or even nonexistent.

Another critical structural concern in rural communities is lack of internet access. According to the research group [BroadbandNow](#), approximately 42 million Americans lack the ability to purchase either wired or fixed-wireless broadband internet. Many of them live in heavily minority urban neighborhoods, rural areas, or tribal lands. "Internet connections are often less reliable, too, with weather-impacted options like satellite internet," according to a 2022 [BroadbandNow report](#). "Rural customers often pay more for lower speeds and face more data restrictions because of bandwidth constraints of satellite and mobile broadband internet." Many rural students are forced to go to a local library or a nearby McDonald's just to get online and do their school work.

Some of the other dynamics at play are cultural. Rural high-school students may not have grown up in families where attending college was prioritized — or even discussed. There may be a sense that going off to college would mean rejecting family traditions — turning away from the kind of work and lifestyle of older generations.

Many rural communities are also tightknit, so young people may simply be less interested in embarking on an individualistic journey far away. "Higher education often focuses on independence, and sometimes there's more of a collective mentality in rural areas," Ardoin says. Since many rural economies are closely tied to a single industry or even a single

employer, Koricich observes, students from these places know they may have to leave college to help their families financially if a loved one loses a job. Rural students who finish college, however, may not stay in — or return to — rural communities, especially if they believe they won't be able to find good work there. This "rural brain drain" is exacerbated by the burden of student-loan debt, which motivates college graduates to take more lucrative jobs in cities or suburbs.

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It's common for rural students to experience a culture shock on campus — and they may also be first-generation students, or from a different socioeconomic background than the majority of other students. Even more quotidian logistics can be challenging — navigating transportation, public services, and the norms of a bigger, unfamiliar place. "I came from a rural community, and I'd never ridden on a public bus system until I got to Penn State," Koricich recalls. "I had to ride around and watch people, because I had no idea how calling for stops worked. That's not uncommon for rural students."

## What are colleges doing to help them?

Boosting recruitment in rural parts of the country is a growing priority for many colleges, some of which now have designated staff members in their admissions offices focused on these areas. Brown University launched a [“fly-in” program](#) in 2019 to facilitate campus visits for rising high-school seniors from small towns and rural communities. The university has since expanded its effort to include even younger students as part of [the Small Town and Rural Students \(STARS\) College Network](#), which is funded by \$20 million from the philanthropist Byron Trott. That partnership of 16 colleges across the country supports not just campus visits but also college-search workshops for high-school students; programs for counselors, teachers, and administrators at rural high schools; and internship and job opportunities.

Colleges have also created special living options for rural students, housing

them in residence halls so that they can navigate their academic experiences together, and providing them with resources to help them thrive and find community on campus. The University of Georgia’s [ALL Georgia program](#), launched in 2018, provides half a dozen students from rural parts of the state with scholarships. It also offers academic coaching, networking events, student-success workshops, and summer programming.

Some institutions are also tackling transportation and technology issues in creative ways. According to the educational consulting firm EAB, Seminole State College worked with a local bus agency to streamline routes to align with course start times on its four campuses. Students and college employees may ride the buses for [free](#). And Northern Michigan University’s Educational Access Network [offers low-cost broadband service](#) in Michigan’s rural Upper Peninsula for subscribers who take one course a year from the university.