



Who Should Read

Enrollment Managers

Presidents, Provosts,
and Deans

Other Senior
Institutional Leaders

The Rural Student Landscape

A Briefing for Institutional Leaders

Executive Summary

Rural Students Are Academically Prepared, But Their College Achievement Rates Lag Behind Urban and Suburban Peers.

Rural students across the country often perform academically at levels equal to or better than their urban and suburban peers through high school. Despite this, the college-going rate for rural students is substantially below the rates for urban and suburban students. We can explain the college attainment divide through a combination of geographic, economic, and cultural factors.

As institutions feel pressure to recruit rural students for both mission- and business-related reasons, it is increasingly important to understand the roots of college-going culture in rural communities. Colleges and universities will need to engage with the three sources of influence: the family, the school, and the community.

Rural Students Have Three Primary Concerns About College Fit and Preparedness.

- “Will I Fit In?” Many rural students share a central concern that their beliefs and values will not be welcomed on college and university campuses.
- “How Does College Align With My Goals?” Recruitment messaging often focuses on opportunities in bigger cities and towns, but not all rural students aspire to leave. They need to see their goals and plans reflected in an institution’s messaging before they’ll consider it as an option.
- “Where Do I Get College Guidance?” For many rural teens, guidance is often limited or not available, making it more difficult to assess options and plan for a career.

The Scale of Rural America Compounds the Challenge for Institutions of Higher Education.

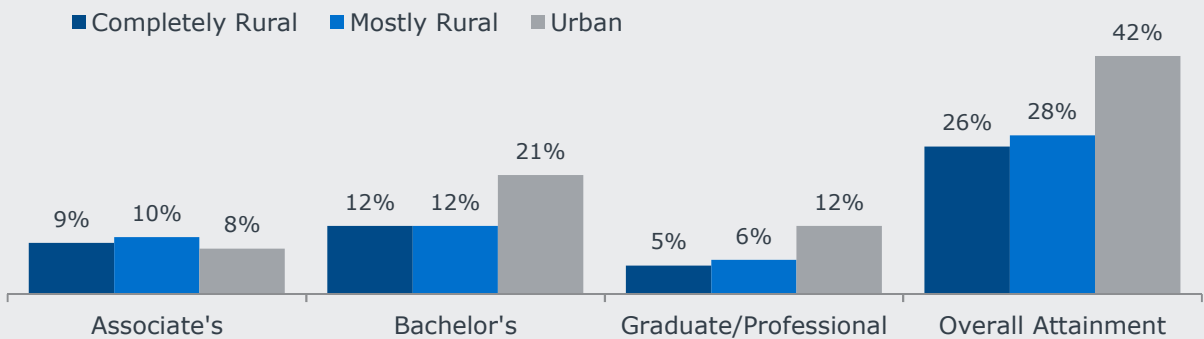
Millions of students attend school in rural areas across the country, and by the very rural nature of their hometowns, they are spread out and difficult to reach. Many institutions sit several hours’ drive from a healthy portion of their state’s rural communities, and sending college representatives to every school or community is infeasible.

Institutions that wish to reach rural students must be innovative with their initiatives while still providing thoughtful programs (often built from the ground up with rural community members themselves) and being mindful of the importance of in-person communication across the country’s rural communities.

The Persistent Achievement Gap in Rural Higher Education

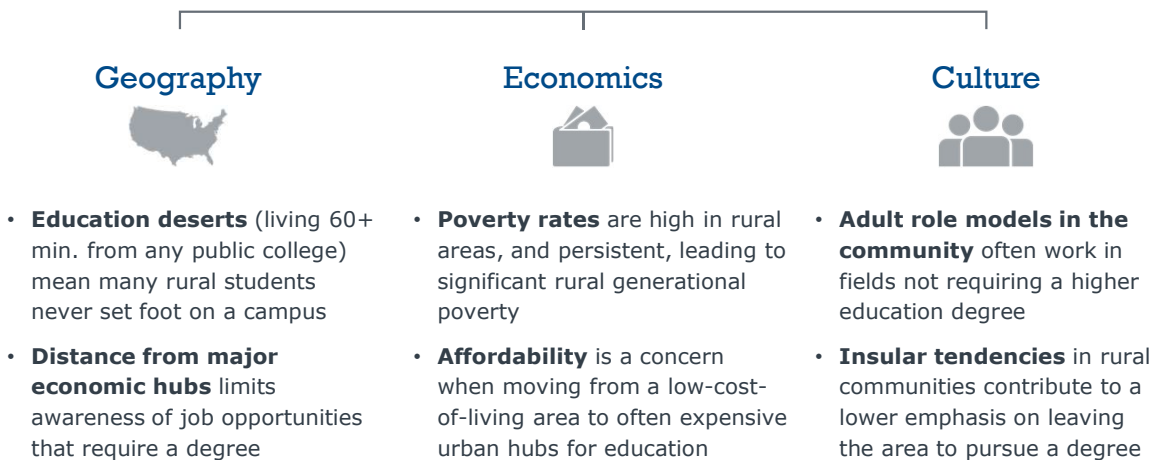
Rural students across the country often perform academically at levels equal to or better than their urban and suburban peers through high school. And yet, year after year, statistics show that despite both strong K-12 test scores and high graduation rates, rural students consistently have the lowest four-year college-going and attainment rates. Interestingly, they *do* hold associate’s degrees at slightly higher rates than their urban counterparts.

Adults Aged 25 to 64 in Rural Areas Have the Lowest Educational Attainment Rates



How Can We Explain the Urban-Rural Higher Education Divide?

No single factor causes these differences in educational attainment, but the forces below help explain much of the discrepancy in rural student achievement.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (2015); EAB interviews and analysis.

Dual Pressures Push Institutions to Engage Rural Communities

Across the United States, many institutions of higher education are looking at rural communities, either for the first time or with a renewed focus. The reasons for this attention vary, from state-level legislative or strategic pressures to institutional mission- and purpose-driven goals. Regardless, all schools—whether they are long-standing land-grant institutions embedded in the community, small liberal arts colleges looking to diversify their student bodies, or any other institution in between—pursue engaging rural communities for at least one of two reasons:

Business-Related Reasons

There are strategic, financial, and/or academic quality-related reasons to recruit rural students.



- ▶ A fast-approaching **demographic decline** requires exploring less-tapped markets.
- ▶ Rural student graduation rates and test scores show they are **qualified, likely successful students**.
- ▶ Building college-going culture will benefit rural areas, **bringing future students** to campus.

Mission-Related Reasons

There are mission, regional service commitment, and/or moral-related reasons to recruit rural students.



- ▶ Rural students have **low college-going rates** when compared to urban and suburban peers.
- ▶ Many institutions have a **strong commitment** to their local and regional communities' health.
- ▶ Increasing **access to higher ed** means better serving students regardless of geography.

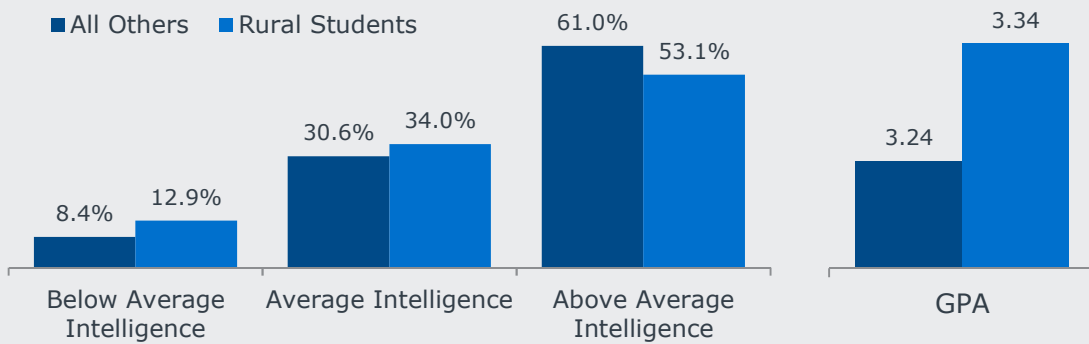
Nationwide, nearly 1 in 5 students are in areas classified as rural, and another 1 in 10 are in areas that are classified as towns that are *fringe, remote, or distant*. These are the same rural areas that are disproportionately suffering when it comes to loss of industry, increasing unemployment, lacking infrastructure, and negative outlook on hope for the future. Amid widening gaps between Americans in rural and urban/suburban America, higher education is uniquely positioned to help reinvigorate the worst-hit communities while also benefitting from growing enrollment and diversity in the process. Leaders at colleges and universities need to think strategically about how they can reach and support these students' life and career ambitions.

Academic Preparedness Doesn't Necessarily Translate to Higher Education Aspirations

As we've seen, while rural students possess academic achievements on par with or better than their urban and suburban peers across the country, they have substantially lower college-going rates. This seems to be attributable, at least in part, to a lack of belief or confidence across the rural student population in their academic preparedness for college, despite evidence to the contrary.

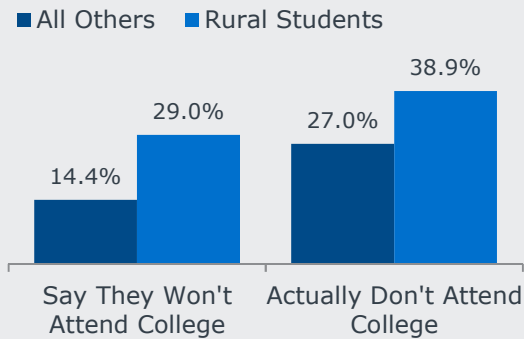
Rural students possess an interesting duality in their higher education mindsets: they possess academic achievements on par with or better than their urban and suburban peers across the country, but they have substantially lower college-going rates.

Rural Students' Self-Perceptions of Their Intelligence Do Not Match Their GPAs ¹



On other measures (e.g., national exams in 4th and 8th grade), rural students also perform at least at the level of their peers across urban and suburban America. However, their academic performance is not reflected in their self-perception. Rural students commonly believe they won't be able to compete with similarly high-achieving students from non-rural areas, and these beliefs impact the choices rural students make, both *saying* they won't attend college and actually not doing so after graduation.

Students in Rural Areas Are Twice as Likely to Say They Won't Attend College



Even Students with Stated College Ambitions Drop Out of the Pipeline

Rural students, who are already likely to not plan on attending a four-year program, actually overestimate their likelihood to attend college. Nearly 10% of students who at least think they "probably" will attend a four-year program do not end up enrolling after high school graduation.

This mismatch between reality and perception is difficult to correct as it's firmly rooted in cultural factors, which we will explore further across the following pages.

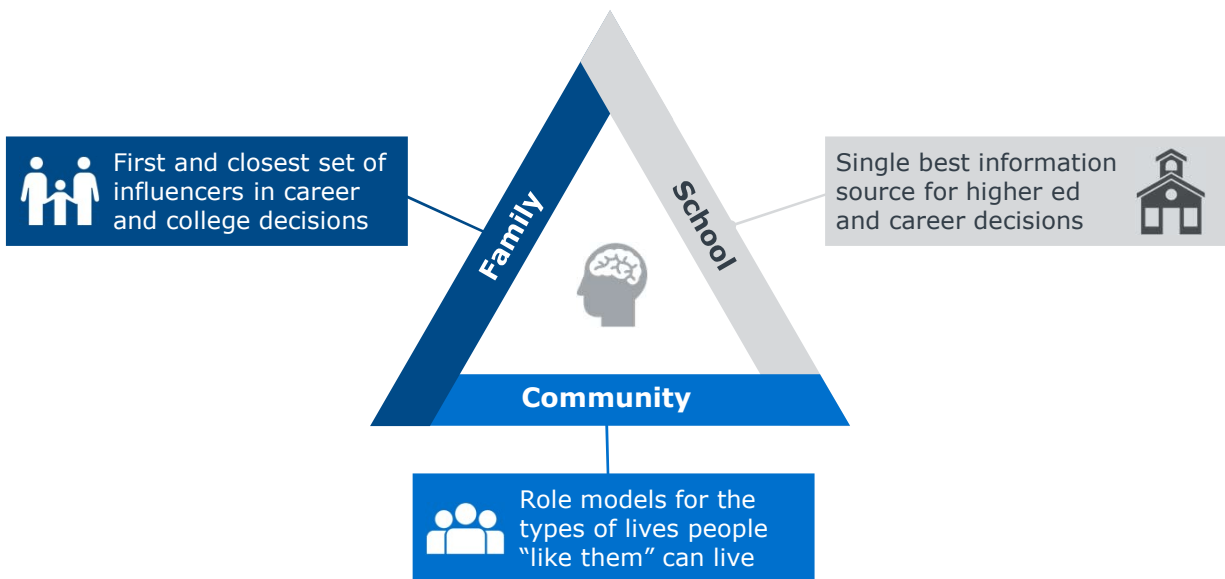
1) "Below Average Intelligence" is a combination of "far below," "below," and "slightly below" average on a self-assessment scale. "Above Average Intelligence" is a combination of "slightly above," "above," and "far above" average on a self-assessment scale.

Source: Seward, K. and Gaesser, A., "Career Decision-Making With Gifted Rural Students," *Gifted Child Today* 41, no. 4 (2018): 217-225; Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth (12th-Grade Survey), Core Data, 2017; EAB interviews and analysis.

College-Going Culture in Rural Areas Affects Higher Ed Perceptions and Behaviors

As early as elementary school, students begin to learn about their future options and the levels of education that will take them there. As students get older, and they begin to focus on a more realistic set of options, they are often informed by the adult role models in their lives. College-going culture is the result of family, school, and community belief in the value of higher education. It is important that families, schools, and communities all reinforce the *same* message and expectations for a student's future, and the young people with the highest college-going rates across the country are those that consistently hear about and observe the value of a degree. Where higher education attainment is low across the adult population, it's unsurprising that college-going culture is weak for subsequent generations. Students often follow in the footsteps of the adults around them, even if this means lower earning potential and or reduced employment opportunities throughout their lifetimes.

Three Sources of College-Positive Messaging that Contribute to Culture



How These Role Models Matter

There are different contextual and behavioral factors from each of these sources that impact students' decisions to pursue higher education or enter the workforce upon high school graduation. Institutions need to recognize the system of messages that rural students interact with; these varied sources of information and influence affect college-going behaviors from a young age.

Family

- Parent and family higher ed achievement levels
- Knowledge key influencers have (or lack) about college
- Family value of academics

Community

- Employment status of other adults in the region
- Community members' past experiences with higher ed
- Access to different types of educational institutions

School

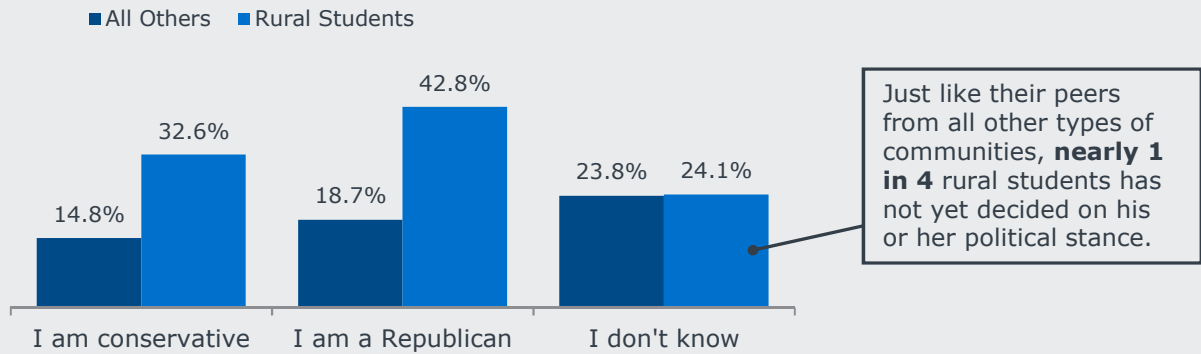
- Availability of counseling during 6-12th grade
- Career education curriculum
- Connection between classes and real-world activities

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Will I “Fit In” With the Other Students on a Typical College Campus?

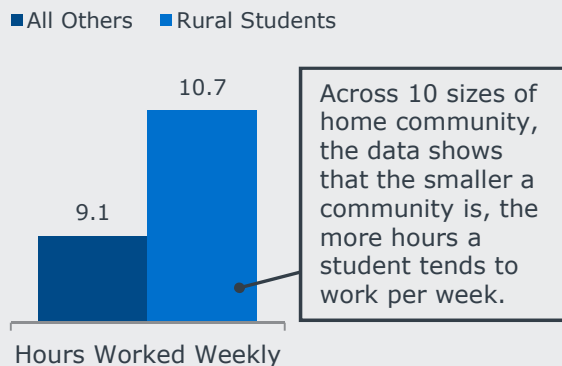
Many rural students share a central concern that their beliefs and values will not be welcomed on college and university campuses. Rural students are more likely to report that they identify as Republican, conservative, and religious than students from any other size town, suburb, or city, and college campuses are perceived as unfriendly to these identities. At the same time, schools cannot assume that rural students want to receive recruitment messaging that reflects these values – they are not a homogenous population and want to be recognized as such. Case in point: rural students are not all of a conservative, Republican identity; nearly a quarter of rural students do not yet know what their political alignment is.

12th Grade Rural Students Are More Likely to Identify as Conservative, Republican

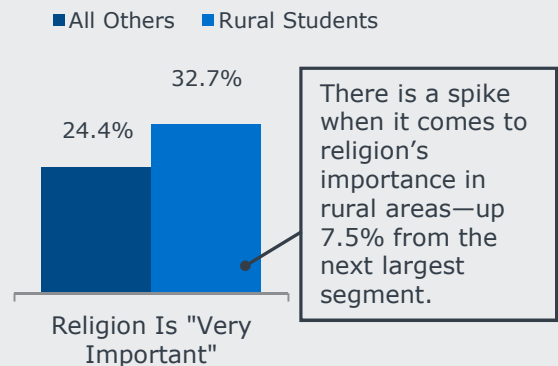


Messaging and support for rural students also needs to be mindful of the differences in rural student lifestyles—and how this manifests in their student profiles. Rural students work more than their urban and suburban peers, meaning this group may have less time for extracurricular activities or test prep. Additionally, religion is more important in their lives, again signaling that their time may be devoted more frequently to family- and church-centric activity than their peers. The ongoing perception that higher ed is “not for me” is pervasive, and the onus is on institutions to prove otherwise.

Rural Students Work More Than Their Peers, on Average



Religion Is More Important in the Lives of Rural Students



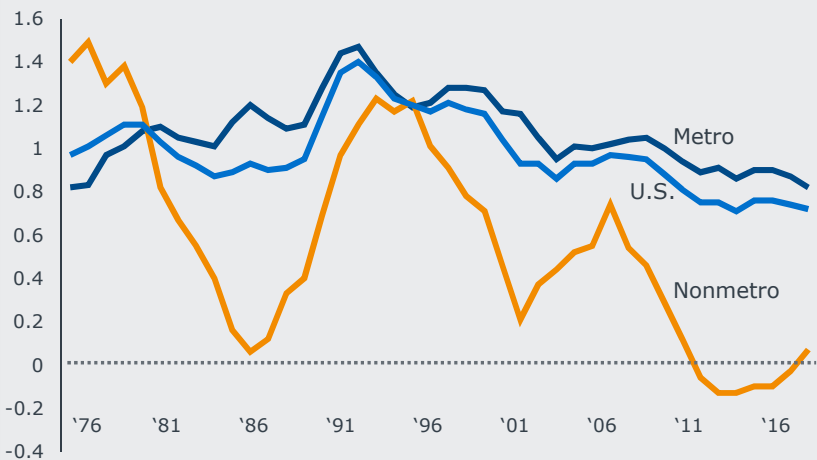
Source: Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth (12th-Grade Survey), Core Data, 2017; EAB interviews and analysis.

How Does College Align With and Support My Career and Life Goals?

Just as college-going culture comes from a combination of inputs from the student’s family, school, and community, so, too, does the perception of higher education’s fit (or misalignment) with a student’s life goals. Too often, the stories that universities and colleges share about students from rural communities are the ones in which a talented student leaves home, achieves a degree or qualification, and moves on to a new town or city. While this may be the goal for some, it excludes those who don’t aspire to leave the community, and may be a sensitive topic for the community as a whole.

Rural America’s Marked Population Decline Is Partially Attributed to “Brain Drain”

Population Change (%) from Previous Year, 1976-2017



In the last two decades, the rural population has grown slower than the rest of the U.S., and in recent years has actually decreased. This is commonly said to be the effect of rural youth leaving for education and career pursuits, creating the “brain drain” phenomenon. Those who stay behind can resent the impact this migration has had on their communities and livelihood.

Create Clear Tracks for Both “Stayers” and “Leavers” to Calm Fears About Fit

The mere recognition of differing aspirations from within the same community may head off many of the concerns rural students, parents, and communities have about pursuing a degree. Consider these two examples of students from the same community with the same field of interest—medicine. Despite many similarities, their needs from a university and their goals are different from one another.



Mercedes

Plans to leave her rural community after graduation.

► Career Goals

- Specialty surgeon
- Anesthesiologist

► What She’s Looking For:

- Competitive residency placements
- Access to terrain leaders



Joshua

Wants to return home and work at the local practice.

► Career Goals

- Nurse practitioner
- Family physician

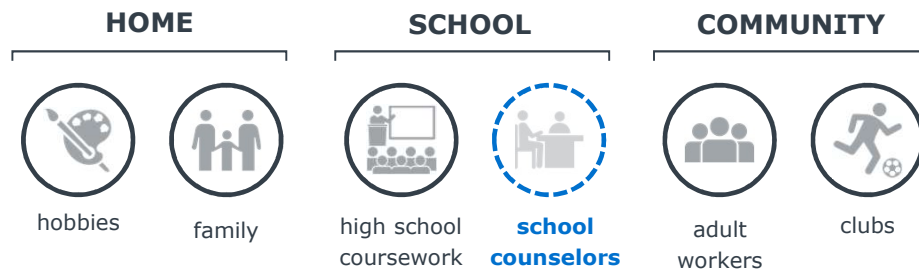
► What He’s Looking For:

- Hands-on community practical work
- Proximity to home

Source: USDA Economic Research Service Data (1976-2017); EAB interviews and analysis.

Where Can I Get Guidance If My School Lacks the Resources to Provide Sufficient Counseling?

Like their peers across the country, rural teens learn about career options and higher education from a variety of sources, including: hobbies, family members, high school courses, adults working in fields of interest, and clubs and organizations. However, one critical source of this guidance—school guidance counselors and college or university representatives—is often less available to students living in rural areas, and notably absent from their set of influencers.



The Rural School Counselor Crisis

Rural students face a particular internal conflict when weighing career aspirations against the importance of place and family—they often have a difficult time separating their individual needs from those of the community around them. This is further compounded when rural school counselors report not being prepared to meet the needs of their students who would otherwise be college bound; they are generally spread thin with responsibilities and multiple roles, such as bus monitor duty, teaching rotations, or administrative support. Rural school counselors often single-handedly manage federal reporting requirements and the acute needs of students facing poverty, hunger, homelessness and abuse. As a result, career exploration and college preparation are handled by less-qualified individuals at the school or simply neglected altogether.

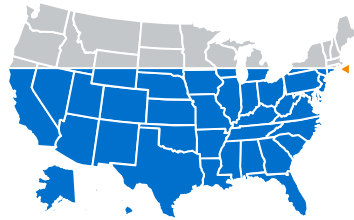
What is more, one study found that rural districts were most likely to have *no* counselor serving their students whatsoever. Without effective counseling, which often is a vital source of advocacy for higher education in their lives, rural students are at a significant disadvantage when it comes time to weigh higher education against their other options, and ultimately select schools and prepare college applications.

For many rural students, conversations at home and in their communities do not encourage them to pursue higher education, and without this critical school-based guidance, rural students are less likely to consider pursuing a degree *and* less likely to successfully navigate the application and enrollment process, even if they want to attend university or college.

Source: Seward, K. and Gaesser, A., "Career Decision-Making With Gifted Rural Students," *Gifted Child Today* 41, no. 4 (2018): 217-225; Gagnon, D. and Mattingly, M., "Most U.S. School Districts Have Low Access to School Counselors," Carsey Research, National Issue Brief no. 108 (2016); EAB interviews and analysis.

The Scope of Rural America Magnifies Other Challenges

Millions of students attend school in rural areas across the country, and by the very rural nature of their hometowns, they are spread out and difficult to reach. Many institutions sit several hours' drive from a healthy portion of their state's rural communities, and sending college representatives to every school or community is infeasible.



70% of the country's landmass is rural



1 in 4 districts across the country are rural

Exacerbating the challenge is inconsistent broadband access across the country. The internet, once seen as a panacea for geography-based challenges, is not the singular solution to the "rural problem." At least a quarter of rural residents lack broadband that allows high-quality voice, data, graphics, and video within their households. Nationwide, 6% of schools—important community hubs that policy makers assume have vital resources like internet—lack broadband access that meets federal connectivity benchmarks, and most of these schools are rural.

How Do Institutions Address the "Rural Problem" at Scale?

The approach must be innovative. Though the internet seems like a promising cure-all, the fact is that thousands of students lack access to suitable broadband. Likewise, it is not doable to use in-person techniques only, as this is not scalable for institutions and costs significant resources.



Use a "train the trainer" model, devoting your own institutional staff members' time to educating, empowering, and sharing resources with rural educators and counselors.

Interventions and programs must be thoughtful. Those who have started building networks and career education pipelines in rural areas have one mantra: "Start small." Effective programs must be built on manageably sized initiatives that are allowed to grow organically.



Generate initial program components through focus group research and community-based feedback. This is easier with pilot initiatives that expand after early success and learning.

Initiatives must have personal touches. Person-to-person interaction is highly valued in rural areas, both because of spotty communications services and because the culture of these places is built on trusting those you know and who stick around as part of the community.

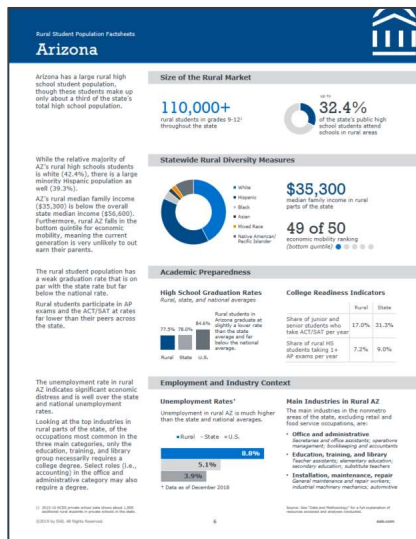


Prioritize small-group and one-on-one relationships between your institutional staff and rural educators. Host regional meet and greets or prioritize visiting when staff are nearby.

Source: ACT Center of Equity in Learning, "Rural Students: Technology, Coursework, and Extracurricular Activities," 2019; EAB interviews and analysis.

Introducing EAB's Rural Student State Factsheets

The first step to ramping up rural efforts is understanding the context in your state and region. The Enrollment Management Forum has compiled U.S. Department of Education, Department of Labor, and Census Bureau data to provide state-specific profiles of rural high school student population characteristics and important contextual employment, income, and industry factors that affect the higher education decisions rural students from your state make.

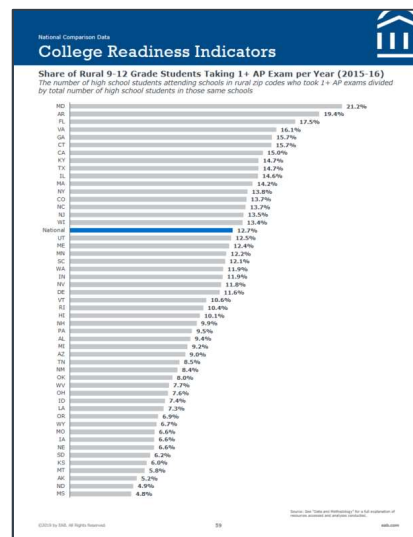


Access the factsheet for your state or for several of your neighboring states to better understand the unique set of characteristics that define the rural community or communities in the area. Topics covered include:

- Size of the rural student market
- Diversity markers
- Academic preparedness
- Employment and industry data

Evaluate how your state stacks up in our national comparison charts using metrics including:

- Size of the rural markets
- College readiness indicators across both rural and general populations
- Unemployment rates across rural and general populations



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