

Rural Students' Access to Higher Education

Rural students possess strong academic credentials but are the least likely demographic to pursue a post-secondary education. Making up about 14 percent of the K-12 population, students from rural areas graduate from high school at rates above the national average and score better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (a measure of 8th-grade public school students' performance) than urban and suburban students. Nevertheless, only 29% of rural Americans aged 18-24 are enrolled in an institution of higher education, compared to 42% of all Americans in this age range. Rural students of color and students from lower-income families are further less likely to pursue higher education than their white and/or higher-income peers.

There are numerous barriers that limit rural students' access to higher education. For one, many rural school districts are in 'higher education deserts,' which makes travel between the school districts and institutions costly and time intensive, for both students and recruiters. Furthermore, rural students often have limited awareness of their options since college recruitment pipelines are primarily built around more populous urban and suburban areas. These issues are compounded by less frequent access to resources and opportunities such as high-speed broadband internet, advanced curricular material, and academic counselors.

Overall, the landscape of rural America is broad and constituted by many varied communities. Indeed, there are over a dozen federal definitions of rural. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Census Bureau define rural areas as regions with fewer than 50,000 people, located several miles from urbanized areas and clusters. While these definitions reflect the population densities of rural areas, neither sufficiently captures the social and economic characteristics that make rural communities markedly different than urban. In addition, the definitions often disagree about which areas should be considered rural. In total, the places that see the most variance around classification account for a population of 37.5 million people. This means that students are often classified as rural on a program-by-program basis, which has led to confusion around the distribution of educational resources.

Recognizing that rural students bring important and diverse perspectives to campus communities, some colleges and universities have increased outreach to rural areas through initiatives like virtual advising and online preparatory courses. While it is too early to know if these efforts will close the college access gap, enrollment professionals are paying more attention to rural students – a critical first step toward their academic success.

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Information gathered from "Locale Definitions," National Center for Education Statistics (nces.ed.gov); "Defining Rural America: The Consequences of How We Count," Center on Rural Innovation (ruralinnovation.us); "In Rural America Too Few Roads Lead to College Success," Lumina Foundation (luminafoundation.org); Lopez and Schwartz's Supporting Postsecondary Access and Success for Rural Students (American Talent Initiative, 2019); "College Attendance Among Rural Students Takes a Dive," Best Colleges (bestcolleges.com)