

Small Fish in a Big Pond: Advising Rural Students at Large Institutions

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Overview

Students from rural and small towns continue to gain national recognition as an underrepresented population in higher education. Research shows this population enrolls and persists in college at lower rates than urban peers, and has additional challenges in succeeding at large institutions. Presenters with personal and research experience with rural student populations will share best practices, as well as their passion for supporting students from small towns. Join this webinar to learn more about this unique population and the ways in which Academic Advisors can assist in the persistence and graduation of rural students in higher education. Attendees will be provided with tools to use with students immediately and resources to learn more about the importance of rural education.

What You'll Learn

- Summarize common identities, characteristics, challenges and strengths of college students from rural and small towns
- Discover definitions of rurality, as related to place, education, community, and individuals
- Apply advising techniques by listing ways in which student support staff, especially those at large research one institutions, can support rural student success in higher education
- Explore additional resources related to rural education, people and places

Post Work/Reflections:

What are some common experiences that rural students may have when:

- transitioning from high school to college?
- transferring from a small to large institution?
- retaining to graduation?

Rural Trends and Characteristics

Academic Atmosphere

- Rural students often had strong relationships with faculty and staff, so larger class sizes means less personal contact with faculty and instructors.
- Rural communities are limited in academic or career paths, so rural students may feel overwhelmed by the number of academic options.

- Rural students may not be as academically prepared as their peers.
- Rural students often see higher education as a path to prosperity, but may feel pressure from families and communities to do well or choose a certain major.

Economic Factors

- Distance to universities plays a role! Access to recruitment or early college access programs may be limited because of extensive travel and expense.
- Rural students are frequently first generation students, often meaning they have a lack of parental knowledge and support, including financial support.
- Rural areas lag behind in economic growth, leading to lower family incomes and wages. Rural students tend to enroll in public colleges and community colleges because tuition is more affordable.
- Knowledge about financial aid may be limited, including how to navigate financial aid systems.

Family and Cultural Adjustments

- Students often feel pressure to "go away" to college from parents, family, and community. This could affect their choice in major or program and career path.
- The size of campus and navigating in new areas is intimidating!
- Fears of urban problems (safety, crime, homelessness, traffic, resources, etc) can discourage students from exploring campus and their new community.
- Rural areas are often homogenous, both culturally and racially, so changes to cultural diversity may be overwhelming. This could lead students to transfer to other schools where they feel they fit better.
- Rural students who are more likely to attend college often held leadership roles and were highly involved in their high school and communities. Knowing how to get involved can be daunting.
- Changing hobbies or entertainment can be difficult and expensive, burdening students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Parental attitudes and assumptions about higher education play a significant role in students' retention and persistence.
- Students may have the fear that leaving for education and a career means leaving their homes for good.

Common Values and Strengths

- Hard-working, experience overcoming adversity
- Tight-knit community capital (and often aspirational capital)
- Innovative/engineering mindset in 'making things work'
- Focus on career outcomes
- Used to being in a space with people of similar values and mindsets
- Experience living in marginalized spaces
- Flexibility in navigating a new (often larger) college environment
- Often the 'first' (in their family to go to college, to leave their hometown)
- Bring their own culture, background to college spaces

Connections to Advising

- **Help students sort through the reasons they are there**, including both academic reasons as well as familial or cultural expectations.
- Encourage and guide students through **exploring academics, careers, and hobbies**.
- **Creating connections to campus is key!** Students who travel home more often can impose a financial burden and leads to transfer or dropout.
- **Longer orientation programs** and opportunities to become familiar with campus are very helpful! **Learning to navigate large campuses** can make a large difference and help students know what to expect.
- **Joining activities and clubs build social capital**, giving students a sense of community and leadership.
- **Build rural students' knowledge of campus support resources**, such as counseling, tutoring, food banks, etc. These resources may not be available in their own community.
- Coach students on **how to approach and connect with faculty**. This will help strengthen their academic connection with campus.
- Help your students need to **strike a balance between home and college life** and relationships.

Rural University Support Entities

- [CU Boulder Rural Network](#)
- University of Georgia's [ALL Georgia Program](#)
- University of North Carolina System's [Strategic Performance Agreements](#)
- Yale University's [Rural Students Alliance](#)
- Columbia College Teacher's College's [Rural Student Group](#)
- University of Chicago's [Emerging Rural Leaders](#)
- Swarthmore College's [Rural and Small Town Students](#)
- [West Virginia's Mountain Scholars](#)
- California State University Chico, [North State Student Ambassadors](#)
- College Assistance Migrant Programs (CAMP), TRiO, Upward Bound

Rural Education Literature:

- [Ardoin, S. 2018](#) – Rurality, socioeconomic status, college jargon
- [Aspen Institute \(2021\)](#) – Rural Transfer Pathways
- [Chambers, C. R. 2020](#) – College conversations in rural spaces (Ch. 13)
- [Crain, M.C. & Newlin, M. \(2021\)](#) – Rural first-gen students
 - Great student/advisor case study example of urbannormativity
- [Flynn et al. \(2020\)](#) - Supports and Barriers for Rural Students
- [Hallmark, T., Ardoin, S. & Means, D. R. \(2024\)](#). Race and rurality
- [Hallmark, T. & Ardoin, S. \(2021\)](#) – Gender, Rurality and College Choice
- [Hudacs \(2020\)](#) - Persistence as Related to Type of Rural Community From
- [Hughes, et al \(2019\)](#) - Individual and Institutional Influences on College Choice
- [Koricich, A., Chen, X., & Hughes, R. P. \(2018\)](#). – Rurality and socioeconomic status effects on college choice
- [Means, D., \(2019\)](#) – Rural African American Students
- [McNamee, T. & Ganss, K. M. \(2023\)](#). Rural students in higher education preparation/enrollment and experiences/persistence
- [McNamee, T. \(2019\)](#) – Rural student social capital
- [Sansone, V. A., et al. \(2020\)](#) – Race, ethnicity and residential location (urban vs. non-urban) in Texas
- [Sorgen, C. H., McNamee, T. C., Tate, B. C., & Shannon-Baker, P. \(2024\)](#). Queer students from rural backgrounds

Additional Rural Resources:

- [Rural-serving Institutions \(RSIs\)](#)
- [Campus Compact RSI Affinity Network](#)
- [Rural & Small Town Special Interest Group](#)
- [Rural Education Community of Practice](#)
 - Rural scholars and resources, mattnewlin18@gmail.com
- [Why Rural Matters](#) Report
 - State-specific data on rural secondary schools
- [The Rural College Student Experience podcast](#)
- [Interactive map](#) of 'education deserts' by zip
- Conferences
 - [Rural Student Success Unconference](#)
 - [National Forum to Advance Rural Education](#)
 - [College Access and Success Summit](#)

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