EAB

Voices from the Field

6 Current Challenges in Recruiting and Supporting Rural Students

About This Briefing

In December 2018, the Marketing and Recruiting Effectiveness Center (MREC) convened several cohorts of higher education professionals to share their challenges and explore emerging trends in rural student recruitment and support.

This briefing is a synthesis of the six most pressing issues that emerged across this series of conversations. These challenges surfaced across member institutions of all sizes and selectivity levels, and more than 20 states across the U.S. were represented. These challenges will form the basis for our current research initiative on rural student issues. MREC would like to thank all those who participated, sharing their challenges and informing this project's research direction.

This briefing is just one of a suite of resources MREC has produced to serve your enrollment teams. For access to our entire library, visit eab.com/mrec

Use This Briefing to:

- Shed light on the current context institutions are operating in when recruiting rural students
- Identify shared challenges in rural student support
- Kickstart conversations on campus with key stakeholders regarding rural efforts

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Many schools feel the pressure of institutional, system, or state mandates to recruit and serve rural students, but must meet new goals without additional funds or resources.

Strong Commitments from Institutional Leaders Put Pressure on Enrollment Teams

A combination of forces, including demographic shifts (forcing institutions to look beyond their traditional pipelines to fill their classes) and institutional diversity efforts have recently driven many educational leaders and systems to increase their focus on rural students. This has left many enrollment teams with ambitious goals to deliver on, but little guidance on how to do so.

THE UNC SYSTEM

In its "Higher Expectations" strategic plan, the UNC System set an aggressive goal to increase rural enrollment by 11% and rural completion by 20% by 2021.

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

TTU President Lawrence Schovanec toured regional small towns and has committed the institution to strongly pushing for more rural students from West Texas.

INDIANA UNIVERSITY BLOOMINGTON

IU Bloomington's enrollment teams aim to hit an informal goal achieved first in 2016—have a student on campus from each of the state's 92 counties.

Rural Efforts Often Emerge Without Additional Staff, Resources, or Funding

These goals and mandates are not often accompanied by additional funding, so teams on campus that own rural efforts must make difficult decisions when it comes to allocating resources. Unlike recruiting in highly populated urban and suburban regions, recruiting in rural areas requires significant time and staff investment for schools to reach even a fraction of the counties from which students might come. Many debate the merits of difficult tradeoffs, such as:

Should we devote 5 staff to rural recruitment so we may yield 6 new students from these communities...

...or should we send those staff to urban areas where we may yield 15 students but miss rural targets?

Can we justify devoting $5,000 to an experimental rural recruitment partnership program...

...or would we be better off using that $5,000 for existing access grant programs we already trust?

"

"We need to make a strong push to recruit students from small towns and rural regions. We exist to serve all the students in our state."

University President
MEDIUM PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

Limited resources make outreach to expansive, thinly populated rural regions nearly impossible to scale without partnerships.

The Scale of Rural America Demands Resource Pooling and Collaboration

For nearly any school, touching all of the region's rural students is a Herculean task, especially considering the level of engagement and information-sharing needed to "reach" these communities effectively. Additionally, many institutions recognize that no school on its own can meet the complex and wide-reaching needs of the rural population. Partnering with grant organizations, other institutions, and/or community and business groups helps amplify the reach of higher education and better provides proof that education opens doors for students in *all* communities.

Partnerships Are Versatile Tools That Solve for a Variety of Challenges

Collaborative efforts between institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations, business and private sector actors, and government create many unique ways to serve the specific rural populations of any given state. Many states across the country already boast creative efforts to recruit rural students, secure rural student success, and feed back into community development and rural revitalization in students' hometowns. For example:

Reach and Recruit Rural Students

Three Georgia schools pool resources to get admissions staff within 50 miles of every rural student in the state of Georgia on their Peach State Tour, which takes place during two weeks in the fall to kick off recruitment travel.

Support Rural Education Development

Education organizations cultivate rural leaders and educators, build professional networks, and support education advocacy across rural Colorado by pooling the resources and expertise of 22 Colorado Institutions of Higher Education to support educators statewide.

1 in 5 students grows up attending schools located *outside* of population centers of at least 2,500 residents.

US CENSUS BUREAU DATA

Tight-knit rural communities pose unique recruitment challenges, from the need for a sustained presence to the difficulty of initially breaking in.

Rural Communities Are Built on Relationships and In-Person Interaction

The cost of entry into many rural communities is a reliable, physical presence. Many rural communities have *never* had a college or university recruiter visit their local area, and it is often out of the question for these students and families to travel to the nearest major campus to visit themselves. Additionally, rural communities are often described as tight-knit, proud of their local area and traditions, and at least moderately skeptical of outsiders. Schools with success in rural areas of their states and regions are those that demonstrate repeated and increasing investment of time and attention in rural communities, which is not easy to scale.

What Your Current and Former Students Say Has Significant Power

In the rural parts of the country, the amount of detail individual community members know about each others' lives is much higher than in urban and suburban areas. This means a personal anecdote or experience can have an outsized impact on the higher education behaviors of other teenagers in that community.

"My counselor really helped match my goals to my studies, and I'm glad I went to EAB University."

"I couldn't finish my degree and now I have a pile of debt. Going to EAB University was a waste."

With even *one* positive experience from a young person returning to his or her home community, institutions are positioned to make further progress and gain deeper trust within the area. Equally important, however, is that even a single negative experience at your institution could turn an entire community against the value of your institution or higher education. This fine line makes rural recruitment intimidating for many schools.
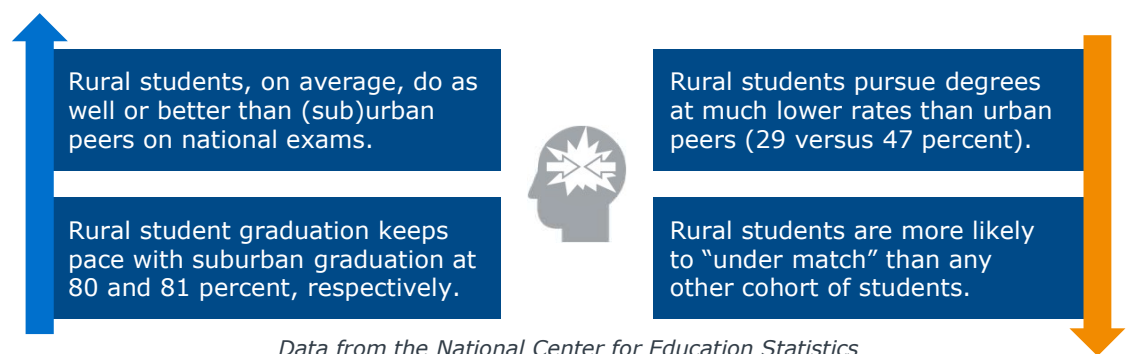
"I have to teach an entire community how a college education makes them all better off. It isn't just reaching a student or even just a family. That bar is high."

Director of Enrollment Marketing
MEDIUM PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

Rural students and their families – even when they aspire to higher education – often feel that a degree is unattainable for academic and/or financial reasons.

Concerns About Academic Inferiority Stop Rural Students from Applying

Research into career counseling and high school mindset has shown that high-achieving rural students are more likely than urban and suburban counterparts to assume that they are underprepared for college, despite having done well in high school and on standardized tests, such as the ACT. One key driver of this mismatch is the lack of peer and community role models that have attended college. This drives lower levels of degree seeking among rural students compared to the national average.

Rural students, on average, do as well or better than (sub)urban peers on national exams.

Rural students pursue degrees at much lower rates than urban peers (29 versus 47 percent).

Rural student graduation keeps pace with suburban graduation at 80 and 81 percent, respectively.

Rural students are more likely to "under match" than any other cohort of students.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics

Financial Concerns Can Dissuade Students from Considering Higher Education

According to U.S. Census data, rural communities overall are not significantly worse off than urban ones, according to median household income and poverty rates. Yet, financial concerns often impact rural students and families differently than their urban or suburban counterparts, and rural college-going rates are lower. Some reasons for this are:

Many rural families **do not understand what is available** in terms of financial aid, making affordability and cost a top concern.

Rural students typically lack guidance on **how to access financial aid and support**, and they often have to navigate this world alone.

Family or community **pressure on rural youth to contribute financially** at the end of high school affords no time to devote to "unnecessary studies."

"

"A lot of the issue is inflated rhetoric. I hear that students don't think [higher education] is accessible until we actually have conversations."

Admissions Advisor
LARGE SELECTIVE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

Rural students may not see how higher education can support their career aspirations, and it is difficult to find relevant guidance in their communities.

Some Rural Students Do Not See the Value of Higher Education

For various reasons, ranging from personal anecdotes to national trends, many rural don't place significant value on higher education. The task of changing this narrative—in addition to selling their institution itself to prospective students—falls on admissions teams. The work of refuting common rhetoric (e.g., "universities are too elite") and changing the conversation is not an overnight project, though, and individuals working on increasing rural presence on campus have to be creative with their messaging and approach.

📁 Case in Point

Problem: A high school counselor in a rural community frequently ran up against students who planned to transition to factory work after graduating high school. They cited wanting to "get their hands dirty" and "work in a factory environment" as their motivations for this plan. The counselor wanted to demonstrate that while the traditional four-year path in college might not be the right fit, the idea that these teenagers could walk straight into factory work was also not likely true.

Solution: The counselor arranged to take these students through manufacturing centers and factories in the region, hoping to show the technical and specialty knowledge doing this kind of work required. The students were surprised by how sterile the environment was and that the jobs were for operating and overseeing machine work, not actual manual labor. This "day in the life" trip was largely successful at teaching these students that their education could not stop with their high school diploma—additional credentials and study of some kind would be the minimum entry requirement, even to do work they considered manual.

Other Rural Students Want to Be on a Career Path that Doesn't Stray from Home

Many rural students have a strong commitment to the people and the place that define their community. Schools that want to recruit this group need to differentiate between the rural students who aspire to leave and those who wish to return home with skills that serve their communities, then use this knowledge to paint multiple versions of the same career path accordingly. Students may have different ideas of what a success in their chosen field looks like, and they may want distinct career trajectories.

Leave Community	interested in medicine	Return Home
▶ Specialty surgeon		▶ Nurse practitioner
▶ Anesthesiologist		▶ Family physician

"In our factories, there's a computer about every 20 or 30 feet. "People on the plant floor need to be much more skilled than they were in the past. There are no jobs for high school graduates at Siemens today."

Eric Spiegel, retired President and Chief Executive, Siemens

THE NEW YORK TIMES

School Counselors in Rural Communities Wear Many Hats and Lack Resources

It is no secret that guidance counselors in high schools are a critical component of college choice, and institutions often rely on good relationships with counselors throughout their recruitment areas to help get students in the funnel. In rural schools, however, the counselors often do not have adequate time and resources to meaningfully engage their students in career discovery activities.

Rural Students Often Face Complicated Life and Career Choices Alone

Straight into workforce	Apprenticeship	Grad/Professional degree
Certificate or licensure	Four-year degree	Doctoral studies

This lack of guidance is especially critical for students in rural areas. A 2018 study* found that rural students in Indiana required *more* social-emotional and career decision-making support than non-rural peers due to the variety of complex community and family pressures on these students. This need for higher levels of support coupled with fewer opportunities to receive guidance from a counselor means that rural students are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to career path exploration and career choice—and understanding how higher education aligns with that.

*Kristen Seward, PhD and Amy H. Gaesser, PhD. (2018). "Career Decision-Making With Gifted Rural Students," *Gifted Child Today, 41(4).*

Institutions of Higher Education Can Offer Unique Expertise in Career Choice

Hands-on, high-impact experiences like clinicals, internships, day-in-the-life-of trips, and other similar initiatives shape high school students' perceptions of careers that they are both interested in and capable of succeeding in. Colleges and universities, more so than any other community or private sector partner, have access to a wide variety of employers and opportunities. Impactful ways universities can further career exploration include:

▶ Providing indirect services (information and training) to teachers, parents, and community members

▶ Working with community organizations (e.g., 4-H, local libraries, mentorship programs) to offer guidance

▶ Promoting exposure to career prospects beyond what is readily available in the rural context

"

"Diversity in career education is necessary, not only […] in the kinds of jobs to which rural students are exposed, but also in the people with whom they interact."

Kristen Seward, PhD & Amy H. Gaesser, PhD

"CAREER DECISION-MAKING WITH GIFTED RURAL STUDENTS"

Schools must determine how best to identify the adjustment challenges rural students are facing and connect them with appropriate resources.

Many Rural Student Characteristics Overlap With Other Populations

Meeting the needs of rural students on campus does not necessarily mean inventing a new first-year transition program; existing support services and programming on campus may serve rural students well. Schools need to identify where the gaps in their current portfolio of services are and craft new programs only to support those opportunities.

Rural Students May Be Similar to Many Other Types of Students

Underrepresented Minority

Non-Traditional

First-Gen

Transfer

Low-Income
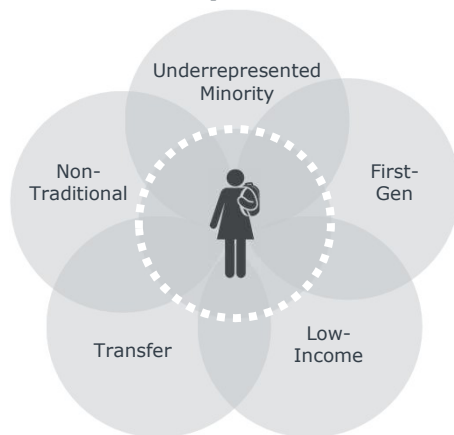
First Step

Many services rural students may need are already available on campus. A service audit of what your institution already does well can kick off discussion about what to develop next.

Common Adjustment Challenges that May Warrant Dedicated Programming

Many challenges can be addressed with existing resources, but schools have identified likely areas that rural student populations may need a custom set of support services. Four core first-year transition activities that rural students may need help with are:

Creating a sense of belonging and finding relatable peers on campus

Applying on-campus opportunities to career and life goals

Preparing to encounter types of people and attitudes not present at home

Tackling rural-specific social and emotional barriers to success

Early movers are tackling these challenges by creating peer mentorship relationships, offering specific counseling services to rural students who show signs of needing the support, and building rural-specific curricula to highlight the trajectories of rural students' lives during and after the on-campus experience.

"

"We've found success in training our academic advisors so they're prepared to counsel students based on their individual backgrounds [and] experiences. Every student … is not going to be the same."

Director of Admissions Recruitment and Outreach
LARGE PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

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Since complex problems require multifaceted solutions, we also apply these insights through a customized blend of technology and services. Our **Enrollment Services** offering, fueled by the market's largest data asset, combines prescriptive analytics, smart recruitment marketing, and strategic advisory support to help colleges fulfill their enrollment mission.

Every day, we use data from 350+ clients, 1.5+ billion student interactions, and hundreds of research calls to give you real-time visibility into competitive market dynamics, shifting student trends, and proven practices so you can engage and enroll your most desired students.

Your Enrollment Success, Powered by...

Enrollment Intelligence

Prescriptive Analytics to provide real-time visibility and actionable insights about market trends, student behaviors, and key performance metrics

Your enrollment success powered by **Enrollment Intelligence** (EI)

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1.5B+
Student interactions analyzed annually

100+
Data and analytics experts on staff to support EI

300+
Field marketing tests performed annually

7:1
Average ROI of EAB Enrollment Services clients

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EAB is a best practices firm that uses a combination of research, technology, and data-enabled services to improve the performance of more than 1,300 educational organizations. EAB forges and finds the best new ideas and proven practices from its network of thousands of leaders and then customizes and hardwires them into every level of member organizations, creating enduring value. For more information, visit eab.com.

About the Enrollment Management Forum's Marketing and Recruiting Effectiveness Center (MREC)

MREC is EAB's new research resource for enrollment teams, supporting strategic decision-making and targeted improvement efforts in marketing and recruiting. Our research team continually evaluates existing and emerging ideas and pinpoints those that are the most viable.

MREC shares new findings each quarter through a suite of deliverables, including:

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