Voices from the Field

6 Current Challenges in Recruiting and Supporting Rural Students

Enrollment Management Forum
Marketing and Recruiting Effectiveness Center
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.

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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.

2 Creating and Maintaining Effective Partnerships
Limited resources make outreach to expansive, thinly populated rural regions nearly impossible to scale without partnerships.

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

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

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

6 Managing Rural Students’ First-Year Transition
Schools must determine how best to identify the adjustment challenges rural students are facing and connect them with appropriate resources.
#1 Meeting an Unfunded Mandate

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.

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.

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

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
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.

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.

#3 Getting a Foot in the Door in Rural Communities

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
#4 Addressing Attainability Concerns

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.

### Data from the National Center for Education Statistics

- 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.

## 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
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.

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.

"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

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.


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”
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

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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