



RURAL STUDENTS

Breaking Down Barriers for
Small-Town Students

By Jim Paterson





Darah Tabrum can quickly list all the good qualities of her students at Navajo Preparatory School, located in the remote, dry and rocky region just east of where the northwest corner of New Mexico meets three other states.

They are independent, she says, and resilient, with an excellent work ethic and willingness to take on new challenges. Moreover, they develop close ties to their peers and involve themselves in the community.

These are desirable characteristics that she hopes colleges will see in the students, nearly all of whom are Native American. But Tabrum, a former high school college and career coordinator who now serves as the community engagement coordinator at Navajo Prep, also knows getting that message across can be a challenge. Too often, she says, there are sticky assumptions about students from minority groups and, more broadly, students from rural areas.

"There are often negative ideas about what our students are capable of. Some people don't fully understand what they can bring to the table," Tabrum said. "Some colleges assume that they aren't ready for a

college-level curriculum without fully understanding rural students and their potential and achievements within the context of their region."

Tabrum is among a growing group of admission officials, high school counselors, and college access professionals who say rural students don't always have the same access to college as their counterparts in more urban areas.

Darris R. Means, an associate professor at the University of Georgia who has researched the problems rural students face as they explore and enroll in college, worries about the subtle, implicit bias Tabrum describes.

"We shouldn't assume anything about these students. They are a diverse group and have many strengths," he says, noting that admission officers, counselors, parents, and others may underestimate or pigeonhole rural students, contributing to "significant constraints for college access and enrollment."

For instance, he is concerned that an overindulgence in "college isn't for everyone" thinking might be more common in some rural areas and may limit how students think about higher education. Meanwhile, some admission offices may wrongly believe small town students are less likely to be successful or won't fit in on campus, making retention a challenge.

Given the barriers, he and others who advocate for rural students have developed a variety of ways they can be supported ranging from extra guidance from peers or others in their close-knit school and community, to early preparations to help them enthusiastically create a path to college and thrive when they attend. Changing both college recruitment strategies and the focus of high school counselors also might help. And addressing the cost of higher education at the local, state, and federal levels would potentially offer the biggest boost, Means says.

THE NUMBERS

Andrew Moe, one of the founders of NACAC's Rural and Small Town Special Interest Group, notes that "despite being underrepresented on college campuses and seeing few admission officers in their communities, students in rural areas are going to college, albeit at lower rates than their suburban and urban peers."

The 61 percent college enrollment rate of students in rural public schools is at least 6 percent below the rate for students in suburban and urban schools, according to national data. Rural students are also considerably less likely to attend a selective college or university, more likely to delay attendance, and, according to some researchers, more likely to withdraw from college.

Undermatching can also be a concern. According to Sindy Lopez, an analyst with Ithaca S+R who also has researched the issue, federal data show that only 16 percent of rural students enroll in highly selective colleges, compared to 30 percent of students from urban areas and 53 percent from the suburbs. In addition, she notes that using consistent academic and social criteria, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* found rural students were 2.5 times less likely to enroll in the top 50 universities and liberal arts colleges, as defined by *US News & World* rankings.

That deficit occurs despite the fact that rural and small-town students generally score better than average on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests and finish school at nearly the same rate as suburban students.

“It is clear that there is a lot of talent in rural communities,” Lopez writes. “If America’s high-graduation-rate colleges and universities provide greater access and opportunity for talented low-income rural students, they have the potential not only to propel these students’ social mobility, but to provide benefits to their communities as well.”

WHAT’S IN THE WAY?

Means and other advocates have found that several factors make it more difficult for students from small towns and less populated regions to attend and succeed in college, resulting in what he calls the “invisibility of rural schools, districts, and students and their families.”

Rural students often cannot travel easily to visit college campuses. College representatives, likewise, face challenges when planning to visits to remote areas.

“Rural students do not always have the resources to make college visits and admissions officers do not frequently visit rural schools,” says Linda Binion, counseling director at King George High School in a rural part of Virginia, about 70 miles down the Potomac River from Washington, DC. “As a result, rural students tend to look at a limited number of colleges in a close geographic area.”

While NACAC promotes consideration of rural students among admission officers, David Hawkins, the association’s executive director for educational content and policy, has noted that more selective institutions are often less likely to participate in small regional recruiting fairs that draw rural students.

Another problem stems from the well-documented decrease in income levels for families living in rural areas, particularly in regions struggling with unemployment or underemployment.

According to one national study, colleges are more likely to recruit from areas with families whose incomes are above \$100,000 and forgo visits to areas where the average family income is \$70,000 or lower, putting rural students at a disadvantage. The study, by EMRA Research, also found that colleges concentrate disproportionately on private schools, which are more commonly found in large urban or suburban areas.

Other research found low-income students were less likely to want to leave their communities and may face pressures from home.

“I worked with a student who supported her family financially and ran the day-to-day activities of the household,” says Binion. “When she applied to college, she left the computer screen open and her mother sabotaged her college application. In some families this change creates conflict.”

There can also be student anxiety about navigating a large or urban campus, and even worry from parents about how it will change their relationship, Binion said.

“Parents, for instance, wonder if they can relate to their college-educated child or if their child will move away and not want to spend time with them after being exposed to a different lifestyle,” she says.

SCHOOL RESOURCES

Donald Crow, a former veteran counselor in rural Colorado who now works on a state program designed to get more trained counselors in schools,

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—*Darah Tabrum, community engagement coordinator, Navajo Preparatory School (NM)*

NACAC’S RURAL AND SMALL TOWN SIG

A group of more than 1,000 professionals from admission offices, high schools, and other organizations have come together through NACAC to form a special interest group (SIG) devoted to improving college access for rural students.

The Rural and Small Town SIG brings together professionals who support rural education and share knowledge of rural assets, challenges, and issues with one another. Anyone can join. A variety of resources are available to members, including monthly virtual meetings and lists of rural high schools.

“We wanted to bring all folks to the table to prioritize rural college access; offer free resources and a network to advisers and school counselors—many of whom have little to no professional development funds but incredible ideas; and to tap experts to share knowledge and best practices,” said group co-leader Andrew Moe, director of admissions at Swarthmore College (PA).

—*Jim Paterson*

says the availability of counselors has a significant effect on college attendance by rural students.

“Because of tight budgets, many of the people in those (college counseling) roles are teachers or other school personnel...Many of them also have full-time class loads, and they don’t have time to attend workshops, or get training, or spend the time with students that is needed. In most urban areas they have specific career and college counselors.”

Limited resources can also mean that schools in these regions provide fewer options when it comes to accelerated academics, unique extracurricular activities, and travel opportunities—factors that many colleges weigh when making admission decisions, says Chris Gage, vice president for strategy and enrollment at Hanover College, located in rural southeastern Indiana. Although dual enrollment has grown in rural areas, with 23 percent of rural students enrolled in at least one dual enrollment class, not all colleges grant transfer credit for those courses. And researchers have also found the rigor of such courses varies widely.

10 WAYS TO SUPPORT RURAL STUDENTS

Here are 10 things admission officers, counselors, and others can do to support rural students.

IN SCHOOLS

Promote higher education early and often. K-12 counselors and others should encourage students at a young age to explore all colleges and careers, initially without regard to cost, size, or distance. With colleagues they can implement coordinated college planning messages for families as students progress through the grades. Summer sessions for high school students have also paid off.

Encourage students to plan ahead. Tell them about factors that sometimes complicate college attendance for students from rural areas. Ask them to consider what their challenges will be—from financial or family pressures to worries about adapting to a big campus or urban area—and how they will overcome them.

Develop an “all hands” strategy. Schools play an important, central role in rural areas. Counselors should creatively and energetically involve the school and local community in efforts to help students appreciate the value of college, explore their options, and apply. Support from alumni and other adults can be especially powerful, as can financial assistance.

Exert peer pressure. Ask recent graduates or, for younger students, high school juniors and seniors, to provide information about the college admission process. Building excitement about attending college can help increase enrollment.

Create college connections. Help connect students with admission officials who may be less likely to visit. Consider online chats or collaborate with other schools on visits and college fairs. Build relationships with admission representatives to help assure them they'll be connected with interested students and get support in their recruitment efforts.

IN THE ADMISSION OFFICE

Bury bias. Don't make assumptions. Data shows rural students perform well. They test better and graduate at a higher rate than students generally. And beyond that, they often have other unique characteristics that make them worth pursuing.

Get creative. Consolidate efforts by hosting a “visit day” for rural students at your school. Consider providing transportation for participants or schedule an online session for rural applicants. For students from especially remote areas, stay in touch online and consider making up for a lack of face-to-face contact by committing to a greater frequency of online conversations.

Offer focused support. The University of Chicago's Emerging Rural Leaders Program has boosted enrollment by offering on-campus summer programs and assistance with the application process for top students from rural and small-town high schools. The university is also developing a network of these schools and top colleges to bolster connections.

Promote peer support. See if enrolled students from a rural region can help with rural recruitment or provide informational programing. Several colleges are working with a national program called Matriculate that rigorously trains undergraduate college students to be virtual college advisers.

Keep your commitment. Too often students from rural areas leave college due to financial, social, or academic pressures. Recognize they may face different and more challenging stressors, but also may be less likely to seek support. Some colleges have connected incoming rural students with upperclassmen from similar circumstances or the same region. The University of Georgia has a very active and successful rural students' group that provides camaraderie and support.

—Jim Paterson



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“When a student is attending a school with fewer resources and little or no AP, they are attracted by the prospects of gaining credit—or even an associate degree—through dual enrollment, but that can be misleading,” Gage says. “They may have what they believe is a semester worth of credit, but they may not be prepared for the college work that follows.”

BATTLING ASSUMPTIONS

Implicit biases are prevalent when it comes to rural students and can lead colleges and the adults supporting these students to limit their goals. And often, parents and students have the idea that simply getting into college is enough, Crow added.

“Many parents in rural areas think four years of college are the student’s ticket to (a) better life,” he says. “Then, unfortunately, the student goes for one or two years, amasses debt, and quits because they were not properly prepared and advised.”

Gage notes, however, that rural students and those advising them also shouldn’t automatically rule out a big school or a campus in an urban environment. He recalls one student who believed she was limited to attending

a small college because she was from a very small town and small high school. Ultimately, she wasn’t happy at the small college. “She transferred to a much bigger institution and loved it and did very well,” he says.

Like Tabrum at Navajo Tech, Gage can tick off a long list of qualities that rural students possess to help them thrive at Hanover and other colleges.

“We have found they tend to be humble, and have a certain grittiness and strong work ethic, and an ability to get things done on their own,” he says. “In fact, they have to often be encouraged to use support services that are available to ensure their success.”

But ultimately, like all applicants, rural students should simply be judged on their merit, Gage says.

“It is important not make any assumptions about any student, including based on where they come from. Sit down with them and seek to understand their lived experiences. Find out why they are interested in your college and what they will bring to it.” [🔗](#)

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Jim Paterson is a writer and former school counselor living in Lewes, Delaware.

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