



Closing Research Gaps to Support Rural Students

Establishing the National Rural Higher Education Research Center

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Despite the economic and social returns of higher education for rural individuals and communities, college enrollment and college completion rates remain low in rural areas. Families in these regions often cite barriers such as geography, finances, and fears of leaving home as obstacles to college attendance and completion. In addition, researchers have historically understudied rural higher education, leaving many rural colleges without concrete best practices that meet their unique needs. High-quality, pragmatic education research designed in partnership with rural communities is one strategy to help practitioners strengthen their ability to successfully support prospective and current college students in rural communities.

For the first time, in 2024, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences awarded its Rural Education Research and Development Center funding to a team focused on postsecondary education rather than K-12 education. The [National Rural Higher Education Research Center](#), led by MDRC with research and practitioner partners across the country, will answer important questions about how to support rural students, rural colleges, and rural workforce development.¹

This unprecedented effort reflects the great need for research to support rural students navigating all types of higher education, whether they are moving away to pursue a traditional on-campus bachelor's degree, commuting to a community college's small satellite campus for two classes at a time, or enrolling in a short-term training program aligned to local labor market needs. This brief discusses why the topic of rural higher education demands national attention, how rural education research has not yet met the needs of rural families, and how the eight constituent studies within the research center will contribute vital knowledge to help rural Americans achieve their postsecondary and economic goals.

The Importance of Postsecondary Education in the 21st Century

Completion of a postsecondary credential has significant implications for lifetime earnings, likelihood of employment, financial stability, myriad health and social outcomes, and intergenerational economic mobility for credential earners and their children.² Earning a credential, whether a traditional bachelor's degree, an associate's degree, or a short-term workforce training certificate, is widely seen as a pathway to the middle class.³

In rural areas of the United States, college attendance and completion rates have long lagged behind those in urban and suburban areas.⁴ Historically, this difference emerged because dominant industries in rural areas, such as mining and agriculture, did not require much postsecondary education. Indeed, for generations, residents of rural areas could often earn a family-sustaining wage with only a high school diploma.⁵ Today, however, these industries have changed significantly. Many mines and factories have closed; most of those still open have adopted high-tech systems and therefore employ staff with advanced training. Modern agriculture, forestry, and other natural resource industries often require new training in robotics and soil science as the fields evolve.

Unfortunately, college access and completion rates in rural areas have not kept pace with the modernization of traditional industries, despite the economic returns of a college degree in rural places.⁶ Consequently, today, most rural areas are experiencing significant shortages of trained workers both in natural resource industries as well as in the vital fields that keep towns afloat such as education and healthcare.⁷ Low postsecondary attainment rates and workforce shortages have ramifications for rural communities' economic vitality, leading to a shrinking population, school closures, persistent poverty rates, and reduced ability to respond to changes in the local or even national economy, such as the expansion of remote work.⁸ The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that 86 percent of counties with persistent, intergenerational poverty in the United States are rural.⁹ Counties that experience the most persistent poverty are concentrated in the Deep South, Appalachia, and the Mountain West and along the nation's southern border.¹⁰ Without the opportunity for postsecondary education and high-paying jobs to keep pace with the modern economy, rural communities may continue to shrink and suffer.

Rural Higher Education Today

Rural areas' college attendance and credential attainment rates significantly lag behind those in other areas.¹¹ Rural high school students are much less likely than their peers to go on to college after graduation, and overall postsecondary attainment rates, even when widely defined to include certificates and workforce training, remain low in rural areas.¹² This is not because rural residents lack college aspirations — quite the opposite. Most rural students and families are highly attuned to the kinds of opportunities that education and training provide.¹³ Going to college is harder for rural families than those in cities and suburbs for several reasons.

One is the issue of distance. Compared with nonrural areas, most rural communities have very few nearby postsecondary options.¹⁴ Nationally, 58 percent of students at a four-year public college attend an institution within 25 miles of their home, and 83 percent attending two-year colleges do so.¹⁵ However, rural areas are by far more likely to constitute what researchers call an “education desert,” where local college aspirants have only one community college or no colleges within that 25 mile range.¹⁶ Living in an education desert forces students to make difficult decisions about moving away from home, spending hours commuting, seeking out online options (if they have reliable internet at home, which is not a given in rural places), or simply not pursuing postsecondary education at all.¹⁷ In many rural communities, so few residents have attended postsecondary education that students do not have access to the types of social and cultural capital that can ease the college application process.¹⁸

While parents and community members often see the economic value in a postsecondary credential, they also worry — sometimes rightly — that a student's going to college means leaving town forever.¹⁹ For rural towns already struggling economically, losing to the big city young adults with the potential to serve vital roles in the community is an economically and socially rational fear.²⁰ Many rural students feel a strong connection to place and would return home after college if well-paying jobs were available or if their field allowed remote work, providing hope for “brain gain” in rural places.²¹ Supporting students' postsecondary educational trajectories — whether those involve short-term workforce training, an associate's degree in a locally relevant trade, a traditional four-year degree, or even graduate school — is a policy imperative for the economic vitality of rural America. The connection between higher education and rural economic viability is clear for rural towns and counties seeking to train residents to fill empty positions for teachers, health care workers, accountants, engineers, civil servants, and more.

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Research Gaps in Rural Higher Education

Despite the critical role postsecondary education can play in alleviating poverty for rural individuals and entire rural communities, very little is known about what works to help improve postsecondary education access and completion in rural places. Rural colleges (those located in rural areas), rural-serving colleges (those located in towns or small cities with a catchment area that includes surrounding rural areas), and small-enrollment colleges (those with fewer than 5,000 students) are underrepresented in higher education research. A scan of the literature in ERIC and the What Works Clearinghouse, federal databases of education research, show very few rural colleges in studies. Even at MDRC, among 39 interventions studied in previous randomized controlled trials, only 3 were implemented in a town or rural setting, and only 2 were implemented at a small college with fewer than 5,000 students.²²

Even baseline data can be hard to come by. There is no single national data source that reports annual college attendance rates or college completion rates among rural high school students by state. Without this information, researchers, school leaders, and policymakers draw inferences about rural education based on national data that may not reflect their local contexts. Alternatively, they may have rich information about their local contexts but lack the resources to determine how outcomes compare with other states or school districts. This incomplete data infrastructure makes it difficult to establish and monitor baseline trends, identify successes that others can learn from and potential problem areas to address, and support districts and localities undertaking new interventions.

When rural colleges and rural students are overlooked in education research, the research community inadvertently reinforces a “one-size-fits-all” approach to best practices, even though the best practices in a college serving 1,000 students may be wildly different from a college serving 20,000. Indeed, many rural practitioners and policymakers today feel that they have no choice but to forge ahead without meaningful research evidence that reflects their context, resources, and student population. The National Rural Higher Education Research Center seeks to transform the research landscape into one where rural colleges can learn from each other, meaningful data on rural students can inform policy and practice, and researchers can better support inclusion of rural colleges and students into their work moving forward. This is the center’s guiding vision.

What the National Rural Higher Education Research Center Will Contribute

The center’s research will answer four main questions:

1. What is the current rural college-going and college completion landscape nationally, and how does it vary across regions and student demographics?

2. How can academic pathways between high school and college be strengthened for rural high school students?
3. How do prospective college students in rural areas conceptualize their postsecondary options and make decisions about undertaking college or workforce training?
4. How can institutions and states improve college persistence and completion rates for rural students?

The constituent studies in the center’s research program reflect higher education as a multistep process that begins with high school preparation for postsecondary education through dual enrollment courses, followed by college access and institutional selection, and then credential completion and workforce skills development. To learn more about the individual research studies and evolving activities of the center, and to gain access to study results as they become available, visit the center’s [website](#).

Addressing Regional Needs

Rural America is not monolithic. Different regions’ geography, history, culture, industries, and attitudes toward higher education vary dramatically. A rural student’s commute to college might be 50 miles through winding forest roads in New England, or 200 miles over flat plains in Nebraska; depending on location, the main trades and natural resource industries range from mining and agriculture to advanced manufacturing and wind power. Attitudes toward higher education are similarly diverse — some communities view college as essential for upward mobility, while others emphasize vocational training, taking classes close to home, or a mix of all three options.

To address the fact that relevant research on rural education must take into account regional differences, MDRC and researchers from universities across the country are partnering with colleges, state agencies, and local organizations primarily in two regions: the South and the Mountain West. Specific states where studies will take place are shown in Figure 1. Conducting multiple studies in each region allows teams to cultivate relationships and build location-specific knowledge, identify cross-project opportunities to support students, and generate findings that take into account local realities. These regions were selected because of the obstacles they face — for instance, high rates of intergenerational poverty and low postsecondary attainment rates among their largely rural populations — and for the strengths they offer: residents who have a strong sense of community, committed college and state agency partners, and a goal of collaboration with all constituents of the research to codesign useful, relevant, actionable research.

Additionally, a slate of researcher and practitioner advisors across the country will provide the research teams with vital insights to ensure that the research work is policy relevant, attuned to local needs, and useable for rural higher education nationally. Advisor locations are also identified in Figure 1.

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