

# SUPPORTING THE PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR RURAL STUDENTS

## CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND STRATEGIES FOR MOVING FORWARD

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### About NACAC

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Since the 2016 presidential campaign, for better or worse, the general public and media have placed rural America in the national spotlight. While the election placed an important spotlight on the lives, challenges, and strengths of people living in rural communities, the spotlight came with the perpetuation of myths of rural America (e.g., people from rural communities are white, ignoring the lives of rural people of color). The national attention on rural America has also elevated the stories of rural students as they navigate their pathways to and through postsecondary education (or not); these stories have been documented in the national media, including articles in *The New York Times* (“Colleges Discover the Rural Student” by Laura Pappano), *The Atlantic* (“The Rural Higher-Education Crisis” by Jon Marcus and Matt Krupnick), and *The Wall Street Journal* (“For Colleges, A Rural Reckoning” by Douglas Belkin).

The purpose of this research to practice brief is to serve as a resource for professionals who serve students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education. This report begins with a brief overview of the political and social contexts that shape rural schools and districts. The report then provides an overview of the factors that constrain and promote college access and enrollment for rural students. It concludes with strategies and recommendations for counseling professionals, college access and preparation program professionals, and higher education enrollment management and admission professionals to enhance college access and enrollment for rural students.

### Rural Schools and Districts: The Policy and Social Context

State and federal educational policies and initiatives have systematically overlooked and made invisible rural schools, districts, and students and their families (Tieken, 2014; Williams & Grooms, 2016), which is alarming given approximately half of school districts are small rural districts and there are 8.9 million students who attend rural schools in the United States (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). The factors that have contributed to the invisibility of rural schools, districts, and students and their families include geographic isolation, economic challenges associated with loss of industry and economic bases, poverty, lower school district budget revenue, and lack of political capital (Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Sage & Sherman, 2014; Tieken, 2014; Williams & Grooms, 2016). These factors have been undergirded with fear of and actual school and school district consolidation due to shrinking populations (Tieken, 2014) and struggles with teacher recruitment and retention (Showalter et al., 2017). Instead of state and federal funding that enhances educational quality for all schools, funding formulas often



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treat rural, suburban, and urban schools the same way without recognizing their unique differences (Johnson & Zoellner, 2016). Policymakers and political leaders who intend to enhance educational opportunities and quality in rural schools and districts often fail to recognize that these rural schools and districts are not monolithic and have a range of diversity related to school size, poverty rates, and racial and ethnic demographics (Greenough & Nelson, 2015).

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### College Access and Enrollment and Rural Students

Drawing on data from the National Student Clearinghouse, researchers found that 61 percent of students from public, non-charter, rural schools enrolled in college the fall after graduating from high school compared to 67 percent of public, non-charter, urban and suburban school students, respectively (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017). Researchers have extensively documented that rural students are at a disadvantage for enrolling in higher education when compared to their suburban and urban peers (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012b; Hu, 2003; Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018; Kotok, Kryst, & Hagedorn, 2016; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995; Strayhorn, 2009). Specifically, when rural students are compared to non-rural students, data reveal that:

- rural students have a lower rate of college enrollment (Byun et al., 2012b; Hu, 2003; Koricich et al., 2018).
- rural students are more likely to delay their entry into postsecondary education (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015).
- rural students are less likely to attend a highly selective college or university (Byun et al., 2015; Koricich et al., 2018).

The next two sections focus on the mechanisms that hinder and promote college access and enrollment.

### *What are the Constraints on College Access and Enrollment for Rural Students?*

Researchers have often focused on individual- and familial-level barriers for college access and enrollment for rural students, finding that the following are significant constraints for college access and enrollment:

- Lower parental educational attainment (Byun et al., 2012b; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010; Smith et al., 1995).
- Family income (Byun et al., 2015; Byun et al., 2012b; Smith et al., 1995).
- Lower academic achievement (Byun et al., 2012b).

However, researchers have complicated the notion that students and families make college choices in a vacuum; instead, inequalities of place are rooted in systemic constraints that go beyond individual- and familial-level constraints (Hillman, 2016; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006; Turley, 2009). I provide several examples of these systemic constraints in a rural context.

- While all rural communities are not monolithic, rural communities have systemically experienced significant poverty due to the loss of economic bases (Roscigno et al., 2006; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Williams & Grooms, 2016). The poverty and loss of economic bases often lead to the tension for rural students who must make difficult decisions to stay in their communities, filled with rich connections to the people and place, or leave for locations with more postsecondary education or career options, potentially never returning (Kotok et al., 2016; Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016; Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014; Sage & Sherman, 2014; Wright, 2012).
- Researchers have found that rural/nonrural differences in college attendance are significantly connected to family socioeconomic status (Byun et al., 2015; Byun et al., 2012b). For example, colleagues and I found African American rural students expressed significant concerns about the cost of higher education (Means et al., 2016). There are also intra-rural community socioeconomic status differences that also influence educational outcomes. For instance, Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2012a) found rural “students whose family income was \$50,000 or more were more likely than students whose family income was \$25,000 or less to earn a bachelor’s degree” (p. 474). In addition, Howley and Hambrick (2014) found that rural students from wealthier families are more likely to leave their rural community to pursue postsecondary aspirations compared to their lower-income peers.
- Although one in four rural students are students of color (Showalter et al., 2017), students of color and their families are overwhelmingly absent from research and the national dialogue on rural America. Between 2000 and 2010, white people represented less than 25 percent of population

gain in rural and small towns, however, Hispanic/Latino individuals in rural and small towns increased by 1.9 million, or 46 percent, during this same time frame (Housing Assistance Council, 2012).

- Researchers have found rural students of Color experience constraints on their pathways to and through higher education (Byun et al. 2012a; Means et al., 2016). For example, Irvin, Byun, Meece, Reed, and Farmer (2016) found that teachers had lower expectations for rural African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American youth when compared to rural white youth. Additionally, rural students of color perceived there to be more educational barriers for pursuing postsecondary education than their white rural peers (Ali & Menke, 2014; Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012). O'Connor, Hammack, and Scott (2010) found that rural white students “are twice as likely as rural Hispanics to attend a 4-year college” (p. 215), and Strayhorn (2009) found that black, rural, male students have lower college aspirations than their urban and suburban peers.

While it is impossible for individual professionals to remove these systemic college access and enrollment constraints for rural students, they can individually and collectively challenge deficit perspectives and practices (Harper, 2012) that place the blame of inequitable educational outcomes on rural students and their families (Howley, Howley, Howley, & Howley, 2014; Rhodes, 2014), especially for families of color and low-income and working class families.

### ***What Promotes College Access and Enrollment for Rural Students?***

Researchers have found several mechanisms and factors that promote college access and enrollment for rural students. Similar to systemic constraints, some of these factors and mechanisms will require state and federal policies, initiatives, and programs. However, some of these factors and mechanisms are also rooted in the systemic-rich resources and opportunities available in rural communities.

- Researchers found that taking academically rigorous courses was a critical factor in promoting college access and enrollment for rural students (Byun et al, 2015). For example, Byun and colleagues (2015) found that rural/nonrural differences in college attendance was significantly connected to access or lack of access to academically rigorous courses. In fact, access to academically rigorous courses was a predictor in earning a bachelor’s degree (Byun et al., 2012a). Additionally, participation in a college preparation curriculum was a strong predictor of educational aspirations (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Irvin et al., 2016). Researchers have found that rural students generally have a lack of access to academically rigorous courses (Byun et al., 2012b; Kotok et al., 2016; Means et al., 2016). However, constraints such as budgets and enrollment size can make it difficult to offer a full range of courses for rural high school students (Johnson & Zoellner, 2016).

- While challenges exist for rural schools, districts, and families, students often benefit from tight-knit communities (Byun et al., 2012b; Farmer et al., 2006; Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Means et al., 2016; Tieken, 2014; Wright, 2012). Rural students have described receiving support from family members, school counselors, teachers, coaches, and peers to pursue higher education and to shape their future plans as a critical source of social capital (Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011; Means et al., 2016). Additionally, Demi and colleagues (2010) found that parental disapproval of college non-attendance increases the likelihood of students enrolling in postsecondary education. As rural students approached high school graduation, they reported school counselors as being a critical source of information and support, but this differed across race and ethnicity (Griffin et al., 2011). For example, “Hispanic students reported that they were less likely than White and Black students to seek out information from any source, and they believed that school counselors were the least helpful source for them” (Griffin et al., 2011, p. 178). In terms of the school context, Demi and colleagues (2010) found that rural students’ perceptions of school climate are “positively associated with school enrollment indirectly through both student GPA and student educational aspirations (Demi et al., 2010, p. 16).
- The tight-knit communities often found in rural communities are used to leverage and develop stronger relationships within the community (Byun et al., 2012b; Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Means et al., 2016; Tieken, 2014). For example, Alleman and Holly (2013) discussed the critical role that local businesses, postsecondary education institutions, civic organizations, and faith-based organizations played in supporting rural students in their pursuit of higher education. Specifically, church attendance was associated with college enrollment (Smith et al., 1995) and rural black students relied on religious leaders to serve as a critical source of college-going support (Griffin et al., 2011). With that being said, it is important to caution against using this argument to make claims that church attendance equates to college enrollment, especially given that not all rural students and their families will identify with Christianity and not all people will feel comfortable attending church based on their social identities, life experiences, and personal beliefs.

### **Strategies and Recommendations for Supporting Rural Students’ College Access and Enrollment**

These strategies and recommendations are not an exhaustive list; instead, this list serves as a starting point for professionals who serve students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education.

- Leaders, counselors, teachers, and other professionals working in rural schools and school districts have an opportunity to capitalize on resources available in their communities to enhance support for college access and

enrollment. This support could come in the form of collaborating with local businesses, community civic organizations, religious organizations, and any nearby postsecondary education institutions to mentor students on the college admission process, as well as future career and college opportunities, offer workshops or resources related to college enrollment, and/or organize visits to colleges and universities. In addition, leaders of rural schools and school districts should consider opportunities to increase the number of professionals working with students on college enrollment efforts. This could be in the form of local, state, federal, and/or foundation funding.

- Higher education institutions play a critical role in college access and enrollment for students (Perna, 2006). Leaders of college admission and enrollment offices should consider how to enhance outreach to rural communities. This could be in the form of visiting high schools in rural communities, sending college materials to rural high schools, hosting rural high schools for college visitations, and communicating directly with rural school counselors to determine their needs and receive feedback on supporting rural students with college access and enrollment. In addition, leaders of institutions of higher education must develop strategies to retain rural students once they're enrolled in higher education.
- All professionals who serve students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education should individually and collectively challenge deficit perspectives (Harper, 2012) that place the blame of inequitable educational outcomes on rural students and their families (Howley et al., 2014; Rhodes, 2014), especially for families of color and low-income and working-class families. This could be accomplished in several ways: 1) professionals should examine their own biases and consider how this shows up in their work as they support students making choices about pursuing higher education, and 2) leaders of college enrollment management and college admission offices should examine their policies and practices that reflect deficit-oriented perspectives.

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