

# RESOURCE GUIDE

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE EXPERIENCE  
FOR RURAL FIRST-GEN STUDENTS



Matthew Newlin, EdD

**CENTER FOR  
FIRST-GENERATION  
STUDENT SUCCESS**

AN INITIATIVE OF NASPA AND THE SUDER FOUNDATION



## ABOUT THE CENTER

Established in June 2017 as an initiative of NASPA and The Suder Foundation, the [Center for First-generation Student Success](#) (Center) drives innovation and advocacy as the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation students. As college and university leaders and practitioners are actively seeking avenues to best meet the specific needs of first-generation students, the Center leads scholarly discussion, information sharing, networking, and program development and relies upon alignment with [four strategic priority areas](#) for success.

## ABOUT RESOURCE GUIDES

In collaboration with experts in the field, the Center for First-generation Student Success has curated resource guides covering a variety of topics specific to first-generation student success. The purpose of the resource guides is to offer supplemental items and create stronger connections to topics covered. Each will include an overview, recommendations, a list of articles and/or examples featuring helpful approaches, and references. To remain current, these resource guides will be updated periodically.

## AUTHOR



Matt Newlin, EdD, is a practitioner and educator with more than 15 years' experience supporting and advocating for first-generation and low-income students. Matt most recently served as director of rural initiatives with College Advising Corps (CAC) where he worked to increase postsecondary enrollment for students from rural and small-town communities.

Prior to CAC, Matt worked at both public and private universities in a variety of student affairs and enrollment management positions. At the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University he established the school's first need-based scholarship; a first-generation student support program; and campus wide financial literacy initiatives.

Matt holds a Doctor of Education in higher education leadership from Maryville University, a Master of Education in higher education from the University of Missouri–St. Louis, and two Bachelor of Arts degrees (Communication and English) from the University of Missouri–Columbia. Learn more about Matt by visiting [mattnewlin.com](http://mattnewlin.com).

## OVERVIEW

Defining rural student is difficult given the varied and, at times, contradictory federal and state classifications for rurality. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) uses an urban-centric locale categorization for schools that includes town and rural, which are defined in relation to urbanized areas (NCES, 2006). Both town and rural have three subcategories – fringe, distant, and remote – which vary depending on the distance from an urban cluster or urbanized area. To be as inclusive as possible, this resource guide will use rural to describe students who come from either the [Town or Rural NCES locales](#).

Nearly 20% of public school students in the United States (9.3 million) attend a rural school (Showalter et al., 2019). However, rural communities struggle with educational attainment: Fewer adults in rural areas possess a bachelor's degree or higher than do urban adults (USDA, 2017). Additional barriers to college access and enrollment for rural students include family income and lower academic achievement (NACAC, 2018). Rural students struggle with college jargon (Ardoin, 2018) and often have fewer supports and resources (e.g., family members, counselors) who can help them define and understand the terminology. Rural students have been found to be more “cost conscious” than nonrural students (Yang & Venezia, 2020) and that grant-based financial aid – federal, state, and institutional – strongly influences rural student enrollment.

Further, parent educational attainment affects rural students' enrollment decisions (Scott et al., 2015). McNamee (2019) found that rural students do not possess the same social capital as do their nonrural peers, but colleges can develop strategies to increase capital, such as increasing families' educational knowledge and establishing connections in rural communities.

Unfortunately, there is still limited literature and research on rural first-generation students' college aspirations and success. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (2019), although rural students progress through college differently than their peers from suburban high schools, they are as likely as their urban peers (84%) to persist from the first to second year of college and are more likely than their urban peers to complete a college degree 6 years after high school graduation (41% vs. 36%). Further, a higher proportion of rural students than their urban and suburban peers pursue dual enrollment courses during high school (Rivera et al., 2019). About one-fourth (24.2%) of rural students enroll in a 2-year college and then transfer to a 4-year institution (Byun et al., 2017). Thus,

institutional partnerships (e.g., high school and postsecondary, two-year and four-year) play a significant role in rural students' college careers.

Contrary to common perception, non-college educated parents in rural communities are often supportive and encouraging of their students' aspirations for postsecondary education (Slocum et al., 2019; Tieken, 2020). Further, parents of rural first-generation students are critical to building students' social capital (Tieken, 2020), and parental support influences matriculation and success in college (Ali & Saunders, 2006; Tillapaugh & McAuliffe, 2019). Rural first-generation students can also feel a sense of disconnectedness from their nonrural peers – with whom, at the outset, they may seemingly have little in common – which can be exacerbated when they try to acclimate to densely populated urban areas and campuses (Schultz, 2004).

Rural first-generation students often encounter environments wholly different from how and where they grew up. For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2017) points out that populations in rural communities could range from 2,500 to 50,000 people, meaning many rural students will be attending a college much larger than their entire hometown population. Additionally, cultural mismatch (Phillips et al., 2020) can affect student persistence. Rural students may need additional on-campus resources (Goldman, 2019; Strawn, 2019), targeted retention efforts (Wells et al., 2019), and peer support (Peterson, 2020) to acclimate and thrive in their new surroundings. To serve rural first-generation students, institutions must undertake a holistic understanding of students' backgrounds and experiences.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Employ an asset-based approach.** Too often a [deficit mindset](#) is utilized when serving underrepresented students. For rural students this is particularly common, due to the myriad institutional barriers they encounter. However, by using an [asset-based framework](#), institutions can empower rural students by building on their strengths (e.g., resilience, adaptability, perseverance) rather than their perceived deficiencies. Rural first-generation students can bring new perspectives to conventional institutional environments.
- [Dr. Africa Hands](#) states:

An asset-based approach intentionally considers the abilities and knowledge that students carry with them based on their lived experiences and that may be engaged in the classroom. This includes things like a students' resourcefulness, self-reliance, problem-solving, ability to create information networks, optimism, goal-orientation, and experience with formal systems. (Hands, 2020)
- **“Rural” is not a monolith.** Avoid the mistake of thinking all rural communities are identical. Rural cities and towns are made up of an incredible array of identities, political ideologies, ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, industries, religions, and familial and cultural values. Higher education practitioners should understand – and celebrate – the diversity of rural America and how to [debunk rural myths](#) that continue to exist. [Dr. Mara Tieken](#), author of *Why Rural Schools Matter* (2020), breaks down some common misconceptions about [rural identities](#):

Nearly 10.3 million people, about one-fifth of rural residents, are people of color. Of this population, about *40 percent are African American, 35 percent are nonwhite Hispanic, and the remaining 25 percent are Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander or multiracial.* And this rural America is expected to grow in the coming decades, as rural areas see a rapid increase in Latino immigration.
- **Learn about your students.** Work with your institutional research office to identify and better understand your rural student population. Colleges and universities do not typically collect data on students' geographic backgrounds, except as it relates to recruitment regions. This leaves institutions in the dark about the diversity of

rural students on campus and how they can best be supported during college.

Important data to collect and questions to consider could include:

- Distance to campus - How far do students travel to attend campus? Is travel home during breaks and holidays limited by distance?
  - Academic preparation - Are students from rural communities as academically prepared as nonrural students? (*Remember:* Rural high schools are [less likely to have the resources](#) for AP/honors courses, SAT/ACT test preparation, and academic tutoring.) Do rural students progress academically at rate comparable to those of their nonrural peers?
  - Persistence and time-to-degree - What are the differences, if any, between rural and nonrural persistence and graduation rates? Do geographic differences affect part-time versus full-time enrollment?
  - Career aspirations - What are the most common majors/minors for students from rural communities? Are career services staff trained on these industries and potential jobs in the fields? Are recruiters in these fields invited to campus for interviews for full-time and internship positions?
- **Geography may limit access.** Rural communities are more likely to exist in [education deserts](#) and [broadband deserts](#), with limiting students' access to the resources and knowledge that are typically available to nonrural peers. (These deserts are particularly pronounced for Native and Indigenous populations.) Additionally, rural students are more likely to prefer attending college close to home, but limited postsecondary options make this difficult. Rural first-generation students may have fewer options for [online/virtual learning](#), as well. Questions to consider may include:
    - Does the distance to campus affect students' academic performance and/or course load? How does this impact persistence and mental/emotional health?
    - Are students less likely to see their family members during breaks or holidays due to distance and cost of travel?
    - How do students balance commute times with work and family obligations? Are courses offered at the most convenient times for these students?

Institutions should be cognizant of rural students' needs and implement ways to [keep students connected](#) to their communities while in college. Flexible learning options and wraparound support services should be available to students who

may be commuting large distances or, for students who live on campus, traveling home less frequently than other students.

- **Create spaces for family members.** As discussed above, family members play an important role in rural students' college experiences and should be included in rural student support services. Though rural students are more likely to be first-generation, family members may want to be involved in their child's college journey so they can be supportive and encouraging. Programs and resources might include:
  - Virtual welcome events for family members who may not be able to attend on-campus orientations
  - Web pages geared toward family members that answer common questions and explain the higher education jargon their students may encounter
  - Academic advisers who encourage family members to participate in advising sessions via virtual platforms, video conferencing, or phone so they can remain informed about students' progress
  - Live or recorded panels with faculty and/or academic deans addressing academic and career-related questions
- **Expand recruitment efforts.** Admissions recruiters are far [less likely to visit and recruit](#) from rural high schools; this creates a disparity in educational access for rural students, particularly first-generation students who may not have family members or counselors to explain the variety of postsecondary options. Work with your admissions office to create [rural-focused recruitment](#) materials that address identify resources available on campus, ways students will be supported during their transition to college, and how to stay connected to family if they are attending far from home. Also, consider establishing peer mentor programs for rural high school students. Recruit undergraduates from rural backgrounds – ideally from the same state, county, or high school, if possible – and develop a “rural community” on campus, so the incoming students feel a sense of belonging:
  - Being able to articulate the [value and benefit](#) of attending college is particularly important for rural first-generation students and their families. Institutions should focus on developing [resources and materials](#) that speak to an investment in a postsecondary degree. As noted above, current students from similar rural backgrounds should be included, as the message is likely to resonate more strongly with students and family members.

- Though it is common that rural students [do not return home after college](#), it is important that institutions find ways to support rural students who do [plan to return home](#) after college. This may mean expanding employer connections to include rural communities and regions; identifying rural-based internship/experiential education; ensuring diverse industries are recruiting graduates on campus; and helping students find remote and virtual employment.

## RESOURCES

- Below are excellent articles and reports examining the college journey for rural students:
  - [Supporting the Pathways to Postsecondary Education for Rural Students](#) - National Association of College Admission Counselors
  - [Serving Rural Students](#) - National Association of Colleges and Employers
  - [Don't Forget About Rural Higher Education Students](#) - Diverse Issues in Higher Education
  - [Rural Students: The Next Frontier for University Recruiters](#) - Keystone Academic Solutions
  - [In Rural America, Too Few Roads Lead to College Success](#) - Lumina Foundation
- Institutional Models:
  - [Rural Student Services](#) at the University of Alaska Fairbanks
  - [Rural U - Early College](#) at the University of Maine at Fort Kent
  - [Emerging Rural Leaders](#) at the University of Chicago
  - [Rural and Small Town Student Support](#) at Swarthmore College
- Professional Development Opportunities:
  - NACAC [Rural and Small Town SIG](#) which is very active on [Twitter](#)
  - [Rural Student Access Network](#) Facebook group
  - [Rural College Access and Success Summit](#)
- Books:
  - [College Aspirations and Access in Working-Class Rural Communities](#) by Sonja Ardoin, PhD
  - [Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America](#) by Patrick J. Carr, PhD, and Maria Kefalas, PhD

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Rural Matters podcast](#), particularly the fall 2020 four-part series, “Rural Higher Education: Challenges & Opportunities”
- Rural researchers to follow on Twitter
  - [Sonja Ardoin](#), PhD
  - [Vanessa Sansone](#), EdD
  - [Ty McNamee](#)
  - [Andrew Crain](#), PhD
  - [Andrew Koricich](#), PhD

*The Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA, does not endorse any third-party services; it is recommended that institutions appropriately vet any third-party platform or service.*

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