



# RURAL STUDENTS AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN COLORADO:

A White Paper By the Rocky Mountain Region of Young Invincibles

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# Letter from The Authors

Dear Reader,

As young people, it is usually difficult to know how to make change. The Young Advocates Program (YAP) with the Rocky Mountain Region of Young Invincibles taught us how to research and impact the issues we face directly. We learned how to identify the issues at hand and advocate for systemic change. Through our many discussions with various stakeholders across Colorado, we learned about the many barriers rural students face in accessing higher education. We also applied our lived experiences, studied policy, and interviewed stakeholders.

The many barriers that rural students face in accessing higher education are systemic, policy-rooted issues. Just as policy can cause problems, policy can also be wielded to fix it. The bottom line is that the status quo of higher education in the United States is a system that is not working for many rural students. The majority of our group are rural young adults from various parts of Colorado. Rural students require and deserve pathways toward better economic conditions and improved quality of life. While progress can be made county-by-county, our findings led us to believe that large-scale systemic change is imperative.

With this project, we sought to give voice to these issues and identify solutions. We hope that you find hope in these recommendations and join us in working to create higher education policies and changes that work for all young adults.

Onward we press,

The YAP Cohort of Fall 2023

Giselle Arroyo, Maryori Guzman, Katherine Harvey, London McElhaney, Rhiannon Mills, Joseph Mitchell, and Graham Spriggs



# Introduction

While over 73 percent of Colorado’s land mass is rural, the 2020 Census estimates that 12.5 percent of Colorado’s population lives in rural, or “nonmetro” areas.<sup>1</sup> While they are a relatively small population, young adults from rural communities across Colorado face unique and specific barriers when attempting to access higher education. For instance, rural communities have lower rates of student enrollment and completion of higher education than urban communities.<sup>2</sup> Students of color and first-generation students living in rural communities are even less likely to enroll or complete higher education than their rural white peers.<sup>3</sup> In addition to wanting to address and identify barriers specific to the rural population, we wanted to highlight steps that policymakers could implement to address and mitigate these barriers.

The many interviews we conducted with stakeholders revealed that accessing higher education poses a litany of structural barriers, including:

- An inability to afford higher education
- Expensive costs of living
- Expensive or limited childcare options
- An absence of public transportation
- Fewer resources for remote and online learning
- Lower parental knowledge or parental support in pursuing higher education
- Cultural shock that prevents rural students from succeeding in urban settings
- Fewer high school counselors
- Limited pathways to certificates or trade programs

These financial, emotional, and material obstacles are often insurmountable for young adults from rural areas. Additionally, for young adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, access to higher education is one of the only semi-reliable routes to economic mobility. Generation Z, the most racially diverse generation in the United States, also has the highest rate of young adults who are pursuing higher education. However, this generation also holds the most student debt and lowest earnings even after completion of higher education. This dynamic is further exacerbated by race. Black young adults hold the highest rates of student debt and larger student debt balances.<sup>4</sup> Inconsistent access to higher education restricts positive career and economic outcomes for many young adults. Access to higher education can enhance rural communities by offering new skills, resources, and knowledge.

1 U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). Without health care coverage in ZCTA5 90804. U.S. Department of Commerce. Retrieved December 5, 2023

2 Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2023). Rural Students in Higher Education [Fact Sheet]. PNPI.

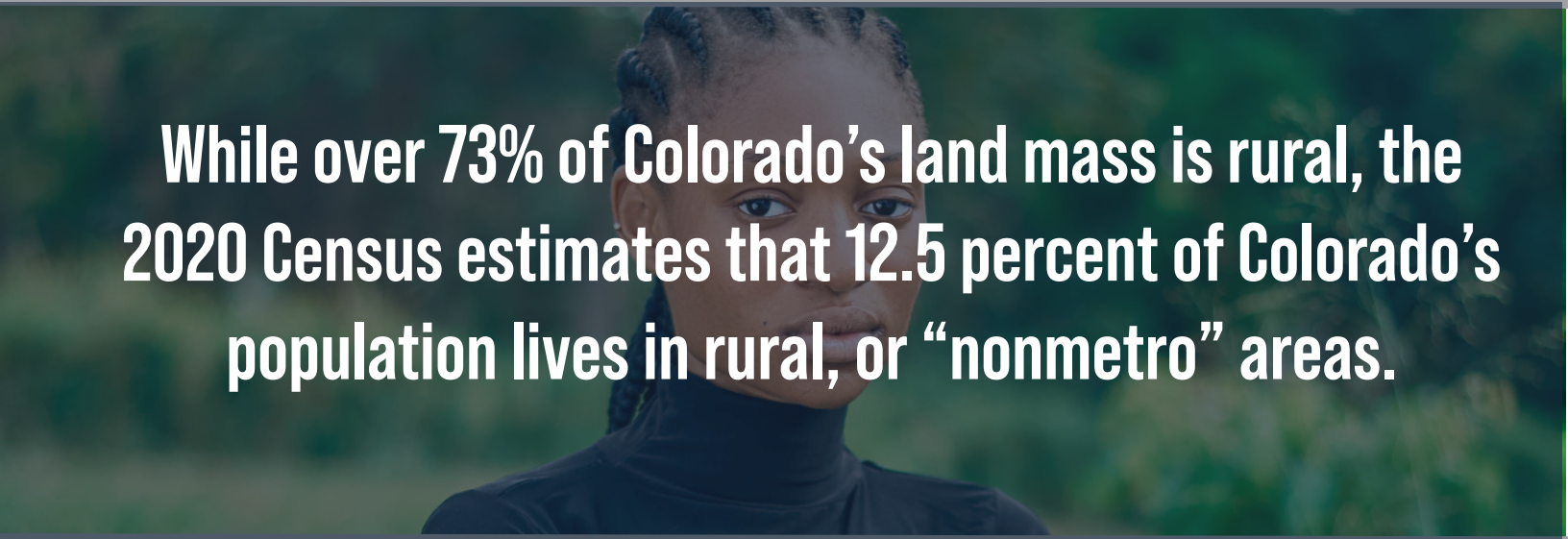
3 Byun, S., Irvin, M. J., & Meece, J. L. (2012). Predictors of bachelor’s degree completion among rural students at four-year institutions. *The Review of Higher Education*, 35(3), 463-484.

4 Eckel, M. (2022, September). The financial health of young America. *Young Invincibles*.



The purpose of this white paper is to better understand the challenges faced by rural young adults when accessing higher education in rural Colorado.

The qualitative data informing the recommendations was collected through interviews with identified stakeholders and practitioners that work on higher education recruitment and enrollment, or who directly serve young adults in rural Colorado. This paper begins with a review of the existing literature that focuses on higher education for rural students and addresses the current barriers that exist. Following the literature review, the data and methods section outlines the process of this research, and the paper concludes with our findings and recommendations.



**While over 73% of Colorado's land mass is rural, the 2020 Census estimates that 12.5 percent of Colorado's population lives in rural, or "nonmetro" areas.**

## Literature Review

The existing literature on the pursuit of higher education by rural young adults predominantly employs deficit-based frameworks to emphasize the challenges faced by this demographic group. This approach, rooted in quantitative data, portrays rural youth as an underperforming and marginalized group.

Early literature on the experiences of rural young adults seeking higher education emerged in the late 1890's identifying several barriers hindering rural students from accessing higher education. Canfield (1889) documented an egregious difference in urban and rural participation in higher education in the United States. He attributed this to a lack of connection between elementary and high schools in rural areas with preparatory departments that would enable rural students to easily enter higher education.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Canfield, J. H. (1889). Opportunities of the rural population for higher education (Vol. 6). CW Bardeen.

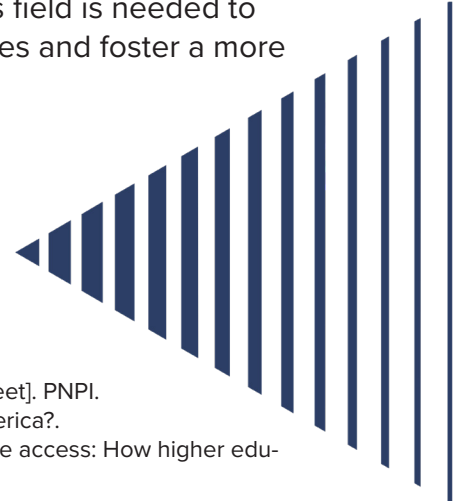
Recent findings from the Postsecondary National Policy Institute echo the persistent gap, indicating that only 21 percent of rural students have earned a bachelor’s degree compared to 37 percent of urban counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

The Chronicle of Higher Education identifies various contemporary barriers, including lower median incomes, geographical challenges, limited extracurricular opportunities, a higher proportion of first-generation students, and the cultural divide within families aspiring for college attendance. Additionally, economic barriers emerge as a significant structural hurdle, impacting rural individuals, especially those of color and first-generation students. Some rural communities “underperform” by an entire grade level. This gap is seen to be even more dramatic within Native American, Black, and Asian students.<sup>7</sup>

McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarskey (2010) stress the failure of higher education institutions to cater to rural students, emphasizing the need for a system designed to accommodate rural life.<sup>8</sup> This literature delineates the complexity and multifaceted nature of challenges faced by rural students, necessitating targeted interventions across economic, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Higher education institutions are designed to politically and financially benefit urban locations, and it comes as no surprise that rural students are isolated and impoverished.

Despite the evident challenges faced by rural students in accessing and succeeding in higher education, a notable gap exists in the research and data collection. The literature reveals a historical reliance on deficit-based frameworks, pointing to problems without fully understanding the rich tapestry of rural communities and their unique contributions to higher education. The lack of comprehensive data on rural student enrollment, financial aid, and degree attainment hampers the development of targeted and effective policies that work to close the gap in both achievement and attendance of rural students versus urban students at higher education institutions.

The intersecting challenges faced by rural students, from economic barriers to cultural transitions, necessitate nuanced, evidence-based strategies. The existing literature revealed a pressing need for ongoing research initiatives that delve into the specific experiences of rural young adults that address known barriers such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. Further qualitative and quantitative research in this field is needed to better inform policies that can address the diverse needs of rural communities and foster a more inclusive and equitable postsecondary education landscape.



6 Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2023). Rural Students in Higher Education [Fact Sheet]. PNPI.

7 Drescher, J., & Torrance, G. (2022). What is the status of educational opportunity in rural America?.

8 McDonough, P. M., Gildersleeve, R. E., & Jarsky, K. M. (2010). The golden cage of rural college access: How higher education can respond to rural life. 191-209.

# Data and Methods

Our findings are informed by qualitative interviews conducted throughout rural regions of the state. We used a purposive sample and reached out to members of rural communities who serve as program directors, state representatives, educators, leaders, and community members working alongside the education sector. One hundred twenty nine stakeholders were initially contacted. Out of those 129 stakeholders, we were able to interview 17 individuals. We used snowball sampling following our initial outreach by asking them to connect us with other practitioners who work in rural student recruitment and retention. To contact our identified stakeholders, we utilized both email and phone outreach. Interviews were conducted either on video or phone calls. Notes were taken by each interviewer to record the content of the interviews. The Interview questions are located in Appendix A.

After the interviews were conducted, we used qualitative analysis rooted in Grounded Theory<sup>9</sup> to identify and code for themes throughout the interviews. To mitigate coder bias, we coded the interviews in groups or pairs. We used both pre-existing and emergent coding. After coding the interviews, we prioritized the codes that appeared most frequently in all of the interviews. Our main themes represented in the paper emerged from the four main codes that we identified. These codes were:

1. Academic Enrichment
2. Economic Barriers
3. System Navigation & Bureaucratic Obstacles
4. Rural Communities/ Rural Identity

## Limitations

Our research presented two main limitations. First, the response rate for our stakeholder outreach returned a low number of interviews. Out of 129 identified stakeholders, we were able to coordinate and conduct 17 interviews. The interviewees are all uniquely located in and around the higher education system, but most are not current students that could benefit from rural higher education. As a result, our findings are not assumed to be representative of all rural community members' opinions or experiences in rural higher education access.

Second, interviewing and coding were performed by different members of our cohort; the interview process varied from interview to interview, including the depth of note-taking, the degree to which we asked clarifying questions, and the length of interviews. Similarly, though

9 Chun Tie, Y., Birks, M., & Francis, K. (2019). Grounded theory research: A design framework for novice researchers. SAGE open medicine, 7, 2050312118822927. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050312118822927>





the interview coding was always performed by multiple cohort members, they were not coded by every member of the cohort. As a result, the coding of themes contains variation across interviews.

# Findings

## Economic Barriers

Our interviews revealed three main economic barriers that limit access to higher education. These barriers are the cost of attendance, income gaps between rural and urban communities, and a lack of transportation for rural community members.

The most frequently cited barrier in accessing higher education was cost. Seventeen interviewees specifically and directly identified the cost of higher education as a barrier. This unanimous response reveals that cost is still the primary barrier to rural students in higher education. In an interview with an accessible education specialist from the Colorado Mountain region, the interviewee stated, “Cost is the number one reason people are not doing higher ed. Whoever I talk to, this is the number one reason they are not pursuing options.” This finding is consistent with the existing literature. Even when adjusting for currency inflation, the price of college in the U.S. has gone up 747.8 percent since 1963.<sup>10</sup> High tuition impacts everyone in the U.S. However, it impacts rural students disproportionately as they may additionally lack access to financial resources and opportunities for scholarships.

On the other side of the same coin, income remains a significant barrier to rural community members. Rural areas have much lower per capita incomes relative to urban areas.<sup>11</sup> This issue presents massive barriers for rural students. Across the board, interviewees emphatically highlighted lower community incomes as a significant obstacle to accessing higher education. Several interviewees voiced that education, by necessity, often fell secondary to other immediate needs. A lifelong rural Coloradan and current employee of The Attainment Center, put it succinctly, “It’s hard to get [rural students] to consider higher education when they are worried about their next meal.” Lower incomes for rural families lead to higher rates of food and housing insecurity, less access to technology, and less funding for primary education. Even when rural community members can access a decent income, the goalposts are ever-moving. An accessible education specialist, working in Southwestern Colorado and with the Ute Mountain tribe, notes that this problem is exacerbated in different areas of Colorado: “Often, people will leave and follow affordable housing and rental opportunities. [This] issue is magnified in the Western slope and Mountain area. People from other regions move into these areas and drive up the cost of living.” These observations are well-founded.

Trends show that since 2020, upper-class families are moving at increasing rates to Colorado;

<sup>10</sup> Education Data Initiative, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> USDA Economic Research Service, 2023.



specifically mountain towns like Aspen, Vail, Crested Butte, and Telluride.<sup>12</sup> As more wealthy people move into these rural communities across Colorado, the income gap worsens, and housing affordability for working-class Coloradans plummets.

Another consistent issue that was raised by our interviewees was the issue of commuting. Rural students are more likely to have to commute or even relocate for college which poses many problems including the price of relocation and the struggle of being far from home. One stakeholder who serves as the Director of Student Engagement at a youth employment and education initiative emphasizes, “We are not near anything. If there’s something they think about or are interested in, there is rarely anything related to it here. There are major transportation barriers. If a student is really psyched on something, they have no way to get there.” Young adults in metro areas can utilize public transportation to visit potential schools, attend training and classes, and participate in workforce development programs with ease. Rural students who are physically isolated often do not have access to these same opportunities.

## Academic Enrichment in Middle and High School

Another theme that emerged from our interviews was how vital the role of K-12 education is in setting students up for success. Interviewees identified a clear need for further enrichment and investment in rural primary and secondary education, specifically improvements in social, emotional, and health education. Rural middle and high schools need more support to further engage, prepare, and create college and career-ready students. The need for further academic enrichment was a consistent theme in stakeholder interviews. In their interview, an employee of Gunnison County School District stated:



**Opportunities exist, but how do we get high schoolers to care about them when they see no real reason to look at the bigger picture yet? In my mind, this is a topic that needs to be brought up and detailed far sooner in the educational lifetime, not presented as a new concept in a student’s junior and senior year of high school.**



Connecting rural students to enriching opportunities earlier on in their education includes providing additional pathways to career and technical education, such as job shadowing, site

<sup>12</sup> Reynolds, E. (2021, January 14). The wealthy are moving to these 5 U.S. mountain towns.



visit days, apprenticeships, internships, community college, trade school, art school, certificate programs, and outdoor education programs. An apprentice navigator from Weld County highlighted that community is paramount in increasing academic enrichment.

**“ Rural students and districts won’t know the opportunity is there unless it is brought to them from all sides... [We should be] hosting parent sessions, consistently inviting school districts to get together for assessment, constant discussion of best practices, adding more people to newsletters, finding new opportunities for presentations through new companies or other different career pathways, getting involved with administration from all over. ”**

Many stakeholders established that rural schools often are not resourced to provide these necessary academic enrichment opportunities. Several interviewees, however, included examples of successful academic enrichment and gave examples of some schools that have implemented successful enrichment programs, including after-school programs and meetings where students can come and ask questions about navigating higher education and life in college. A few rural high schools also offer dual enrollment programs that are designed to aid the transition to college-level courses and allow students to get a head start on obtaining college credits. These opportunities equip students with increased knowledge and skills which then leads to an increase in opportunities for continued education and careers. A robust academic curriculum that fosters community involvement can also give students early exposure to many career options as they learn more about their passions.

Many stakeholders that we spoke to want to see further opportunities to help students discover their strengths and interests before deciding on their options post-high school. An employee of the Colorado Conservation Corps states:

**“ Students often learn more through seeing and doing than sitting still and listening. Give them more hands-on material related to the subject that allows them to explore an idea for themselves. They will find more ways that it may (or may not) connect to their strengths and interests, which is really what educators should be teaching. Not why college or eventually choosing a career is important, but how to identify the things that make you tick. And, most importantly, that you not only can but should act upon that curiosity because it can only bring you closer to finding something that you love doing. ”**



Another example of resources that were identified as lacking in rural middle and high schools is mental health resources. Mental health is a barrier that many students face in middle and high school and this issue was further exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic and resulting isolation. Struggles with mental health can severely limit students' capacity to consider pursuing higher education. A coordinator for a center of Rural School Health & Education stated, "Rural communities are isolated - many students don't understand or know if they are facing a mental health issue, for example. Access to better services for mental health and health in general is needed in communities who do not have the best doctors." Interviewees emphasized that it is vital for school districts to consider implementing extracurricular programs and resources that expose rural students to higher education, address mental health, build emotional intelligence, and boost confidence levels. They also identified the need to target underfunded schools and rural communities.

## **System Navigation / Knowledge Capital / Bureaucracy**

Stakeholders further identified that students often have a lack of experience or exposure when it comes to navigating the bureaucratic systems necessary to access higher education. Rural students need additional support and assistance navigating college applications, scholarships, and Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) applications. An accessible education specialist in the mountain region stated: "How many of us know parents or ed[education] leaders that tell high school students to go to college but not how to go, where to go, what to study, how to pay for it? We do them a disservice by doing that, and by having pulled out CTE [Career and Technical Education] from schools. Help them understand what is best for them and what makes sense." While many rural students may lack knowledge of opportunities for financial assistance, they also lack knowledge of how to apply in the first place. A K-12 school counselor in Gilpin County explained that often "Lack of access to higher-ed institutions for some students is limited by FAFSA. Due to it coming out later, you have to pick a college without knowing aid for the year."

Because rural students often have fewer financial resources and longer distances to travel, this makes them more reliant on funding support such as FAFSA. One interviewee identified the numerous financial problems posed by FAFSA's late response time. For instance, a late response from FAFSA may increase the amount of hesitation a student might feel when deciding their next steps since they are depending on an unknown amount of money.

While pursuing higher education is not the only option, it is unfortunate that rural students are generally not given clear and clean-cut paths to college. The Director of Student Engagement at a youth employment and education initiative stated that a "Lack of exposure means [students] don't know what is accessible if they have never seen it, been exposed, or it is so far out of their life experience. Going down to a campus in the city can be so uncomfortable because it's so different." Navigating the systems in getting to higher education as well as navigating the campuses and schools themselves can often feel intimidating and overwhelming for rural students. A program director, from the same youth employment and education initiative,

identified this exposure barrier as a social barrier: “For a lot of youth it’s really scary to think about leaving a town where they’ve never had to make new friends or work with people from different backgrounds.” Since most urban schools have nearby college options, there is a stronger pipeline in place for students from urban areas who wish to pursue higher education. The drastic environmental change from their hometowns can be incredibly intimidating to rural students. Equipping students with support as they navigate post-secondary applications and systems would help to make them feel more resourced and comfortable when considering pursuing higher education.

## Rural Community Investment & Rural Identity

Throughout our interviews, stakeholders additionally identified the need for both community advancement and investment in rural communities. Stakeholders additionally identified a need to further invest in rural communities as an alternative to providing resources or scholarships that allow individual rural students to access urban institutions. Many rural community members feel strongly about wanting to stay in their communities but end up having to leave to access education or career opportunities not offered in their communities.

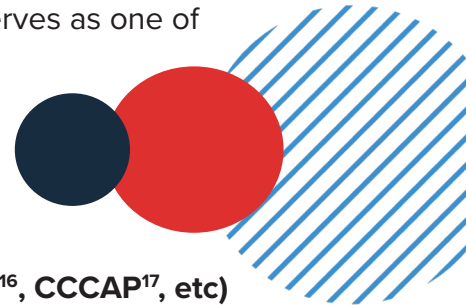
After completing post-secondary education, graduates with large student debt balances often find themselves unable to return to their hometowns. Urban areas offer more jobs, higher wages, and affordable housing. When asked what rural student success looks like, a senior advisor at an experiential learning science center in Eagle, Colorado, responded “[Success looks like] seeing people from the valley<sup>13</sup> that stick around and stay to be part of the solution. [It’s] nice to see young people stick around where they grew up and want to be a part of that area.” Another stakeholder, who owns and operates a traveling experiential education program, agrees: “[Systems] are not building space for our people, and are instead reaching for national attention with a predominance in everything looking and feeling shiny and new... Success looks like more money going into rural schools and communities. Building a thriving rural community, where people are putting money into the betterment and getting money back.”



Financially investing in rural communities would mean that rural students wouldn't have to choose between remaining in their community or accomplishing their career and educational aspirations.

An additional theme identified in stakeholder interviews is that there is a significant amount of cultural alienation and separation between rural and urban communities. This divide is reciprocal—rural folks and urban folks alike feel disconnected from each other. These cultural differences can manifest in many ways that harm both rural and urban communities. An accessible education specialist from the Colorado Mountain Region identifies a general rift: “[There is a] very real sense of urban-rural divide and perceived differences and sense of superiority on both sides.” In addition to this broader rift, some rural community members specifically feel they are perceived in a negative light by urban communities. Another accessible education specialist, working from the Eastern Plains, describes this experience, “[There is a] perception for some that rural communities are shrinking, conservative, and all the same demographic; some are actually becoming much more diverse and we need specialized resources that [currently] lack funding.” One stakeholder, the program director from the youth employment and education initiative notes, “A lot of rural people love where they grew up. They don't want to leave. And that doesn't seem to resonate with some people from urban areas.” Some stakeholders additionally called to attention the population of first-generation rural students; identifying this demographic as a rural culture that is removed from conversations around higher education. Regardless of the origin of the feeling, many rural learners feel a cultural divide between themselves and higher education—and this divide serves as one of many barriers that prevent rural students from accessing higher education.

# Recommendations



## **Recommendation 1: Expand eligibility for programs (SNAP<sup>14</sup>, CHP<sup>15</sup>, TANF<sup>16</sup>, CCCAP<sup>17</sup>, etc) that support rural students beyond education-specific financial barriers**

Addressing all the economic barriers students face in accessing higher education is beyond the scope of this paper. There are many economic issues facing rural students beyond the simple cost of tuition that have secondary effects within the educational sphere. Expanding public assistance programs to close these income gaps would assist students struggling with food insecurity, housing insecurity, inaccessible childcare, inaccessible healthcare, and more—needs that come before, and get in the way of, schooling.

Expanding programs targeted at food insecurity, housing insecurity, child care, and healthcare would indirectly create the opportunity for disengaged learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds to consider pursuing higher education.

<sup>14</sup> Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

<sup>15</sup> Child Health Plan Plus (CHP+) is public low-cost health insurance for certain children and pregnant women. It is for people who earn too much to qualify for Health First Colorado (Colorado's Medicaid program), but not enough to pay for private health insurance.

<sup>16</sup> Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

<sup>17</sup> Colorado Child Care Assistance Program

**Recommendation 2: Increase access to dual enrollment programs for rural students as a means of reducing tuition costs**

Another avenue to reduce the costs of higher education would be to expand dual enrollment opportunities across the state. For instance, Jefferson County Public Schools offers dual enrollment for all high school students within their school district. Adams State University also allows dual enrollment for students within Alamosa County. Dual enrollment programs allow students to get a head start on their college education often at a very low to no cost. This in turn can lower the cost of college for students by getting pricey prerequisite classes out of the way or even allowing them to graduate high school with an associate's degree.

**Recommendation 3: Subsidize rural transportation to college campuses**

Rural areas, by nature, are farther away from metropolitan areas where the majority of higher education institutions are located. This burdens rural students with the additional cost of either relocating or commuting long distances. Schools and local governments should allocate resources and assist students with these costs through grants, subsidies, or additional scholarships. By specifically addressing this barrier, rural students will have more equitable access to higher education.

**Recommendation 4: Provide funding for extracurricular and preparatory programs to rural middle and high schools**

Consistent and equitable funding for rural communities both in-school and out-of-school programs looks like increasing access to extracurricular activities and preparatory components for competitive college application processes. These programs need to focus on providing academic enrichment, social-emotional support, and exposure to opportunities with the explicit goal of getting students ready for higher education beyond academic performance.

**Recommendation 5: Allocate Higher Education Funding towards the creation of a rural student peer navigator role**

One way to address the challenge of navigating bureaucratic and social barriers is to ensure that rural students have access to more hands-on support for navigating educational opportunities, financial aid resources, and social barriers in urban areas. Providing funding to hire rural student navigators who work under the Department of Education would provide rural students with mentorship, guidance, and resources to navigate the complexities of higher education. These rural student navigators would ideally be former students from rural communities who know firsthand the unique challenges and red tape that rural students typically face compared to their peers from urban communities.

**Recommendation 6: Fund local programs that reward community reinvestment in rural areas**

Recruit and retain professionals to rural areas to reinvest in rural communities: Fund programs to provide financial support to professionals (school psychologists, teachers, health care providers, etc.) who choose to work in rural areas after school. This could include loan forgiveness and scholarships. Specifically, recruit and reach out to high school students in rural areas so they know they can go to school and will have jobs in rural areas to come home to.

**Recommendation 7: Further research that centers strength-based perspectives in rural access to higher education**

Existing literature on the experiences of rural young adults seeking higher education largely uses deficit-based frameworks. Deficit-based frameworks point to “problems” or “gaps” in the rural community seeking higher education, using largely quantitative data that paints a picture of an underperforming, under-resourced, and marginalized group of rural young people. Using a deficit-based framework inherently creates solutions based on the idea that rural students have shortcomings that necessitate extra measures, support, or programs to access urban higher education. We strongly recommend that future research in the field utilize strength-based frameworks and center the experiences of rural students. Right now, the research asks: How can we help rural students adapt to higher education? Instead, we encourage future research to ask: What unique strengths, cultural characteristics, and contributions do rural students bring to higher education? How can higher education structurally shift to reward these strengths? Higher education institutions should learn why it is important to intentionally invest in rural students.





# Conclusion

In each of the interviews, stakeholders identified innumerable barriers that rural students face in accessing higher education. From economic barriers to bureaucratic red tape to cultural transitions, the barriers are diverse. Understanding the unique needs of rural communities is paramount for crafting effective strategies to support rural students and ensure their academic success.

Stakeholders repeatedly pointed to cost as the primary and most prohibitive barrier to accessing higher education as a student from a rural community. Economic barriers are complex and multifaceted, and there are no simple solutions to fix them. Aside from lowering tuition costs themselves, our recommendations provide student-focused solutions that could mitigate the impact of high costs.

Our findings additionally showed the existence of significant barriers aside from direct economic issues, including social and cultural divides between rural and urban areas, difficulty navigating application and financial aid processes, and subpar funding for local primary and secondary schools. The implications of this research extend far beyond the scope of this paper. By specifically focusing on addressing these challenges identified by our stakeholders, Colorado can reinvest in rural communities, which are often overlooked and undervalued. As we move forward, ongoing research and data collection is imperative to inform evidence-based policies and adapt strategies to evolving challenges. These recommendations provide a roadmap for policymakers, institutions, and communities alike to collectively work towards a more inclusive, accessible, and supportive higher education landscape for rural students.



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