

A Special Report from
College Success Arizona

How Information and Opportunity Gaps Limit College-Going in Rural Arizona

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About College Success Arizona

College Success Arizona is working to significantly increase the postsecondary attainment rate of students in Arizona, particularly for those who otherwise would not be able to attend or graduate. By doing so, we believe that we will improve the quality of life not just for those individuals and their families but also for the state as a whole.

Acknowledgments

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Preface

College Success Arizona is committed to helping more students in our state access higher education and attain a certificate or degree that will enable them to compete in Arizona's increasingly dynamic workforce and provide them with greater economic mobility. Central to our work is an ongoing effort to identify and understand the barriers that prevent students in Arizona from applying to, enrolling in, and graduating from a postsecondary institution.

These efforts are especially focused on three opportunity groups in Arizona—Latino students, low-income students, and those who would be first generation college students—whose future will have a major impact on the prospects of our state in the coming years. These groups are underrepresented in higher education; increasing their participation and success will be essential to reaching our statewide attainment goal—set by Achieve60AZ—of ensuring that 60 percent of Arizonans, ages 25-64, hold a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2030.

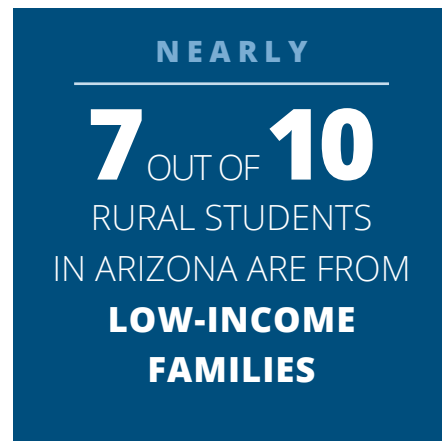
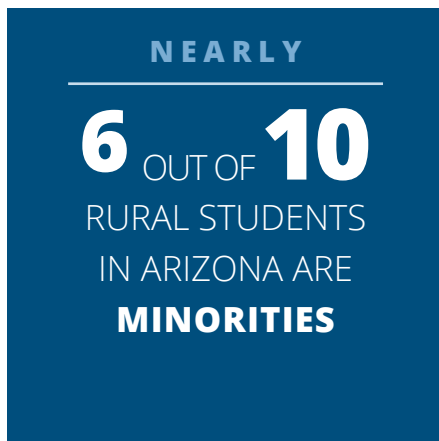
“As a native Arizonan from Miami, rural Arizona has always been important to me. I have been fortunate to know many of the pioneer leaders of this great state who hailed from rural Arizona. These leaders provided opportunities which enabled me to achieve my goals and serve Arizona. Today, we must continue to provide the opportunities and support systems for rural students that can enable them to be inspired and believe in their dreams of achieving a college education.” -Honorable Ed Pastor, Retired Congressman

Many students in rural communities are part of one or more, and sometimes all three, of these opportunity groups. And, too often, rural students are overlooked when it comes to the statewide policies designed to strengthen K-12 education and improve postsecondary access and attainment. Their status as an often “forgotten” demographic means that many rural students receive less advisory support and have access to fewer education programs and resources than their urban and suburban counterparts. **This contributes to the widening national gap between rural and urban college completion; between 2000 and 2015, this gap increased from 11 to 14 percentage points.**



This special report is not quantitative analysis or academic research. Rather, it is intended to bring greater attention to rural students in Arizona and kick-start a statewide conversation about addressing specific challenges that limit college-going in rural communities. It presents information from our work and experience in the college access field, insights from numerous focus groups and interviews, public data, and findings from scholars and organizations nationwide to highlight key factors that influence college-going in rural Arizona

Historically, rural communities have represented an important part of the leadership pipeline in Arizona. Many prominent leaders from these communities have made, and continue to make, rich contributions to government, business, industry, and education. Regrettably, though, as opportunity in Arizona has grown more and more concentrated around urban and suburban centers, we have seen the rural leadership pipeline dwindle, along with a broader decline in the sustainability and prosperity of rural communities.



This has been accompanied by a waning college-going culture in many of these communities. In our conversations with students, families, and educators in rural Arizona, we learned that there is a pervasive feeling of being “stuck.” Many rural students see a future defined by limited opportunities for educational success and economic mobility after high school—regardless of whether they remain in their home communities or leave to attend college, which for some, may be the only option because they live more than 50 miles from a college or university in an education desert.

Some of this diminished sense of opportunity is attributable to socioeconomic status. Nearly seven in 10 students in rural Arizona are from low-income families, which has been shown to decrease the likelihood that a student will attend a postsecondary institution and graduate with a certificate or degree. But socioeconomic status alone does not completely explain why rural students participate and succeed in higher education at lower rates. For example, even the highest-income white students from rural areas are less likely than their well-off white urban and suburban counterparts to attend a postsecondary institution immediately after high school.



The lack of higher education and career opportunities that students in rural Arizona perceive and experience is also due to a significant information gap that prevents them from fully understanding their options after high school and from learning about the supports and resources available to them (financial aid, for example). Simply put, rural students in our state do not have sufficient access to the advising, resources, and preparatory experiences that enable them to make informed decisions about the postsecondary options they have and which ones they are ready to pursue. The absence of a strong college-going culture in many rural communities is both a symptom of and a factor that contributes to reduced postsecondary participation rates among rural students.

With respect to postsecondary education and economic opportunity, Arizona's geographic inequity—which disadvantages rural students based on where they live and can compound the racial and socioeconomic disadvantages that many face—is not a problem that rural communities can solve on their own. Rural districts are already strained by meager budgets, the state's per-pupil spending on instruction is \$1,500 less than the national average, and educator shortages that make it difficult to ensure that there are quality teachers in every classroom and school counselors at every high school. Moreover, unlike urban and suburban communities, most rural areas do not have the tax base to supplement education funding through bond measures. This inequity is a challenge that Arizona must address as a state—with contributions from government, industry and the business community, and the secondary and higher education systems—to ensure the sustainability of our rural communities.

To this end, an essential step toward improving postsecondary access and success for rural students will be for Arizona to develop state-sponsored programs and policies that help more students understand their higher education options and make informed decisions. College Success Arizona has previously recommended that the state “develop and promote programs and policies designed to help students and families better understand their higher education options and make informed decisions about their future.” We believe that such programs and policies would not only strengthen the potential of the existing Education Career Action Plans (ECAP) regulation and help address the information and opportunity gap that disadvantages rural students, they would also provide valuable supports for all students, improve Arizona's college-going culture, and increase overall postsecondary attainment in the state.

Closing the information and opportunity gap is imperative if we hope to build a stronger college-going culture in Arizona and to sustain thriving rural communities. These communities have long been vital contributors to the prosperity of Arizona's industries and economy. Waiting to implement programs and policies that will benefit the entire state—and thousands of individuals and families—represents, with each cohort of students, a lost opportunity that we cannot retrieve. We must act immediately, as a state, to ensure that students and families in rural Arizona have equitable postsecondary opportunities that can empower them with credentials that can lead to economic mobility and prosperity.

Rich Nickel

President and CEO

College Success Arizona



SECTION ONE

Closing Information and Opportunity Gaps, Increasing College Attainment

To increase postsecondary access and participation in Arizona, and meet our statewide goal of 60 percent attainment (Arizonans, ages 25-64, who hold a postsecondary certificate or degree) by the year 2030, we must implement effective strategies to address barriers that prevent students from enrolling and succeeding in higher education programs that lead to a certificate or degree. This imperative is especially relevant to increasing attainment rates among population groups that have historically participated in higher education at lower rates, such as Latino students, students from low-income families, and those who would be first generation college students.

Equitable access to education and economic opportunity means more than the existence of programs and supports that, theoretically, all students could pursue. Students need to know about, and understand, their postsecondary options; without reliable information and advising about these options, and their implications for potential careers, students' actual access to these options is reduced, if not effectively eliminated.

As a result, many individuals and families throughout Arizona do not benefit from the advantages a college credential provides, such as greater economic mobility and stability, and expanded career opportunities. Similarly, communities with low postsecondary attainment rates do not benefit from the economic growth and skilled workforce capable of meeting the needs of industry and business.

This is why College Success Arizona has previously recommended that the state create programs and policies designed to close the higher education information and opportunity gap. Our experience working with students, families, and educators throughout the state—from urban centers to small rural towns—has shown us that access to the right information about postsecondary options can make all the difference when high school students and their families are considering their futures. Learning about the different pathways to earn college credentials,



such as certificate, associate, and bachelor's degree programs, and their value in the labor market can help high school students see how college can benefit them. Similarly, knowledgeable advising about the college application and financial aid process can help make college attendance and success a practical reality for students and families, and build a stronger college-going culture in communities throughout the state.

Creating state programs and policies that improve access to postsecondary information, as College Success Arizona recommends, could help ensure that every high school in Arizona has the capacity to provide advising and counseling services that help students and families navigate the higher education landscape. They could also facilitate the development and dissemination of tools to help students understand what skills and credentials they will need to enter a given profession.

VOICES FROM RURAL ARIZONA

“Students don’t know what they don’t know. They don’t know where to look. And they don’t know what to look for. For many students, their parents may not have gone to college, and so they may not know what colleges offer and they may not know what programs there are to find out what the options are.”

—School Administrator

A Spotlight on Rural Students

To inform our own efforts to strengthen postsecondary advising and improve how information about higher education is disseminated to students and families in Arizona, College Success Arizona has extensively studied the information and opportunity gaps that affect students in rural communities. The issues rural students face encapsulate, in many ways, the need to improve how Arizona prepares and informs all high school students to understand and pursue postsecondary options.

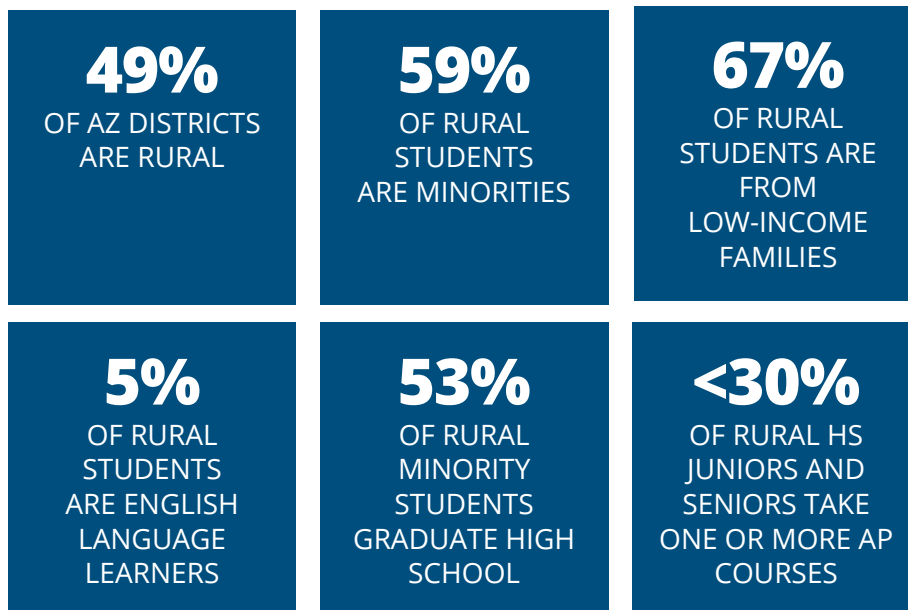
Nationally, the gap between rural and urban college completion is growing. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, the gap widened from 11 to 14 percentage points between 2000 and 2015.¹ In Arizona, rural students—many of whom are Latino, from low-income families, would be the first in their families to go to college, or some combination thereof—are often disadvantaged by a diminished college-going culture in their communities and, relatedly, an education system that does not provide adequate and actionable information about postsecondary options.



Existing programs designed to encourage college-going in rural areas provide important services and supports to rural students. But, for all that these programs do, they represent a patchwork response to a challenge that would be better addressed systematically. Moreover, such programs are often implemented through grant funding, or other time-limited funding streams, or grants, meaning their long-term viability and sustainability are not certain. When programs end, whether due to funding limits or shifting organizational priorities, there is often nothing to replace them or serve as an alternative source of postsecondary support for rural students. State programs and policies, by contrast, would provide sustainable support throughout Arizona.

Arizona can develop and promote programs and policies that will help students and families better understand their higher education options and make informed decisions about their future.

Arizona Snapshot: Education in Rural Arizona Communities





Understanding Information and Opportunity Gaps in Rural Arizona

In spring 2018, College Success Arizona began a research project focused on the information and opportunity gaps regarding college access and options that rural students in Arizona experience. The project, supported by Freeport-McMoRan Inc., is part of a larger effort by College Success Arizona to create a statewide framework for enhancing the quality and volume of college readiness and access information, and to create knowledge and develop behaviors that can improve the college-going culture in the state, particularly in rural areas.

Existing research confirms that poverty and geography contribute to an information gap about the requirements and process of going to college, as well as a difference in the college-going culture among students living in urban and suburban areas of the state and students living in rural areas of the state. The purpose of College Success Arizona's research and information-gathering efforts is to better understand how the college-going rate for rural students in the state is influenced by not only an academic achievement gap but also, relatedly, by insufficient information and advising regarding what it takes to get into and succeed in college.

In addition to secondary research, College Success Arizona conducted focus groups with students and parents in rural communities across the state. These focus groups were conducted, in May 2018, at high schools in each of these communities. College Success Arizona also conducted supplemental interviews with school administrators throughout Arizona.



SECTION TWO

Barriers to Higher Education Rural Students Encounter

Rural schools educate a significant proportion of school-age children and youth in the United States. More than one in four U.S. schools are rural and more than one in six students attends school in a rural area.² A majority of rural students in 23 states come from low-income families, and more than 25 percent of rural students nationally are children and youth of color. Notably, despite these figures, just 17 percent of state education funding is allocated to rural districts.³

How Rural is Defined

The Census Bureau categorizes rural areas in terms of what they are not: as areas that are non-urban. Urban is defined in two ways: urbanized areas of 50,000 or more people, and urban clusters of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Agriculture also defines rural areas as those that are primarily non-metro area counties. Non-metro counties include some combination of open countryside, rural towns (places with fewer than 2,500 people), and urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of metro areas.

Geography has a significant effect on the distribution of cultural, economic, and educational resources that inform postsecondary planning, access, and attainment. Relative to their peers in non-rural areas, rural high school graduates attend college at the lowest proportional rates in the country. Compared to 62 percent of high school graduates from urban areas, and 67 percent from suburban areas, 59 percent of rural high school graduates attend college in the fall immediately following graduation.⁴ Nationwide, 42 percent of young people ages 18 to 24 are enrolled in institutions of higher education, but just 29 percent of these students come from rural areas. By contrast, 48 percent of students in higher education institutions come from urban areas.⁵



Additionally, research from Texas Tech University shows that rural students are more likely to attend community colleges—which represent an important and valuable option—but they have decreased chances of attending highly selective institutions and are less likely to attend institutions that conduct research and confer graduate degrees.⁶ Across numerous research studies, factors cited as contributing to lower college attendance rates for rural students, compared to urban and suburban students, include:

- ▶ **the relative lack of adults with a bachelor’s degree in rural communities;**
- ▶ **lack of postsecondary options in the immediate area;**
- ▶ **financial challenges that may interfere with students’ abilities to plan for the future; and**
- ▶ **limited awareness of occupations that may require a college degree.**

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Education and Students in Rural Arizona

In Arizona, approximately 49 percent of all public school districts are in rural communities, and the state has one of the most diverse rural student populations in the country.⁷ Almost 60 percent of Arizona’s rural students are minorities and one in 20 is a non-native English speaker. Nearly 70 percent of students in rural Arizona are from low-income families.⁸ According to an evaluation of rural education in all 50 states, conducted by the Rural School and Community Trust, Arizona ranks second (behind Mississippi) on the list of high priority states, those where the condition of rural education is most in need of improvement.⁹

Educational outcomes in rural Arizona schools are especially concerning. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 4th and 8th grade reading and math results indicate that student performance in rural Arizona is among the lowest in the United States. And, on important measures of rural students’ college-readiness—high school graduation rate and ACT/SAT participation—Arizona ranks among the bottom 10 states. Less than 30 percent of high school juniors and seniors take at least one Advanced Placement course; the national average is nearly 46 percent.¹⁰



Improving Rural Education: Top Three Priority States

State	Percent Minority Students	Percent Students from Low-Income Families	Per Pupil Instruction Expenditures	HS Graduation Rate for Minority Students
Mississippi	44.5%	70.9%	\$4,676	60.5%
Arizona	58.5%	67.1%	\$4,485	53.2%
Alabama	28.3%	58.9%	\$4,797	78.8%

Source: Rural School and Community Trust ¹¹

In rural Arizona, numerous factors identified in national research contribute to a diminished college-going culture. Challenges related to lack of information about college options, concerns about college affordability, family influence, and inadequate preparation for college—all of which disproportionately affect students from groups underrepresented on college campuses, such as low-income students and Native American students living on reservations, who also experience their own specific challenges¹²—can make college seem out of reach.

Additionally, relatively low postsecondary attainment rates, in many rural Arizona communities, mean that students often do not interact with many adults who hold a degree, there are few higher education institutions nearby, and most students and their families have limited financial means. The result is that students' perception of what it means to go to college is defined, in large part, by a shortage of information and opportunity. Parents and students alike do not have the guidance they need to make informed decisions about how to prepare for and apply to college, secure financial aid, and identify a program of study that will enable them to pursue career options that lead to greater economic mobility.

VOICES FROM RURAL ARIZONA

“There’s no traction in rural communities. You suffer more economically. Even if we were to go get certified in a trade, or go to earn our master’s or doctorate degrees, there’s no work here. People don’t want to come here. There are no job opportunities.”

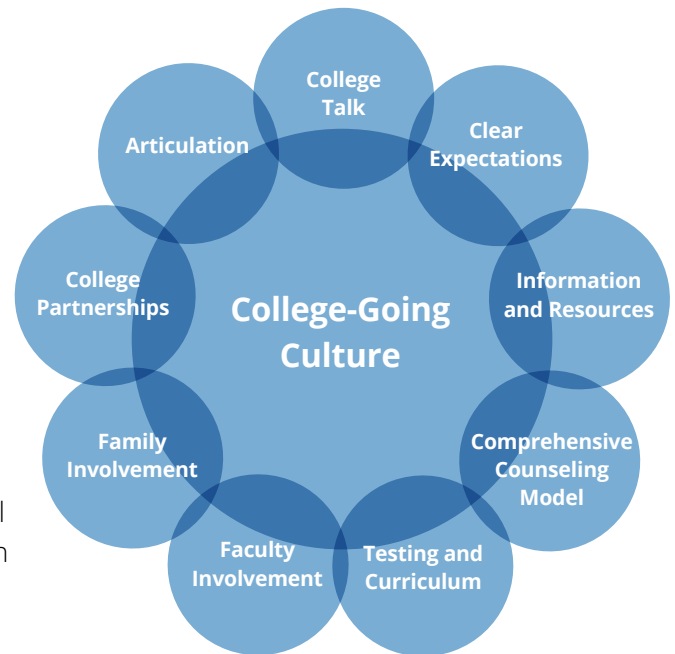
—Student



Building a College-Going Culture

College Success Arizona defines college-going culture as the environment, attitudes, and practices in schools and communities that encourage students and families to obtain the information, tools, financial aid, and perspective that enhance access to and success in postsecondary education. The development of a strong college-going culture depends on the ability for students to learn about options for their futures and understand the education required for certain careers, which often starts in middle school. Schools that convey the expectation that all students can prepare for the opportunity to attend and be successful in postsecondary education—along with families and communities—reinforce a message of high expectations for a student’s postsecondary pursuits.

Research from the University of California-Los Angeles identifies the following interrelated elements of a college-going culture that the education system can build and strengthen.



Source: MacDonald and Dorr¹³

The Information and Opportunity Gaps in Rural Arizona

Students and parents interviewed by College Success Arizona, during our focus group research, described a feeling of being “stuck,” without viable options for either college or a career. Compared to urban and suburban areas, rural communities in Arizona have lower postsecondary attainment rates, meaning there are fewer parents and adults in the community familiar with the higher education system, the variety of options it offers, and the necessary steps in the college preparation and application process.

When it comes to postsecondary options, students and parents College Success Arizona interviewed expressed a lack of knowledge about the specific roadmap of the college application process, including what tests need to be taken when, and what is involved in securing scholarships and other aid that would enable them to attend once accepted. Parents in each community we visited said that they were relying on their children to help them outline these options. One parent College Success Arizona spoke with noted that “parents are not aware of the opportunities for their kids. Often, they don’t know. Many parents here did not pursue a postsecondary option. They don’t know how to help their kids, even though they want to.”



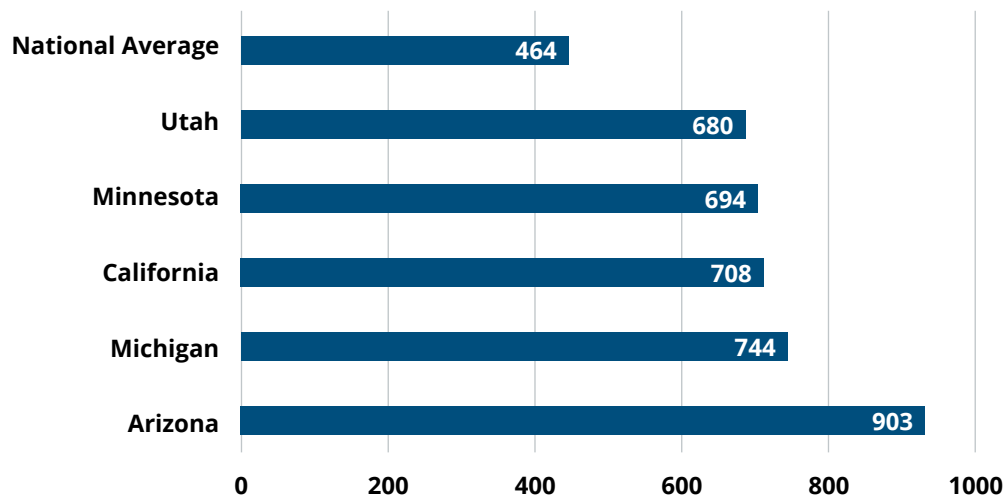
Five Factors That Diminish College-Going for Rural Students

- 1. Limited information.** Insufficient information about the college preparation and application process contributes to the lower college attendance rates among rural students. Students from low-income families and first generation students often rely on school counselors as their single source of information about college.¹⁴ Additionally, financial aid information, or lack thereof, is a determining factor in a student's decision to apply to college.
- 2. Limited preparation.** Rural schools tend to have fewer resources, relative to urban schools, to prepare students for college. Typically, rural high school students have less access to college preparatory courses, and they are usually less informed about postsecondary opportunities.¹⁵
- 3. Limited awareness of options.** Rural students are less likely to know or interact with role models who are college-educated, and, historically, relatively few jobs in rural communities require a college education.¹⁶ As a result, they may not see the value of college or think that there are college options available to them. For many, rural community college attendance may be the only choice they see.¹⁷
- 4. Family influence.** Parents have a strong influence on students' decisions about higher education. Rural students are less likely than urban students to have college-educated parents, and their parents are more likely to lack information about higher education opportunities and the college application process.¹⁸
- 5. Personal factors.** Compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, rural youth often lack confidence in their ability to succeed in college¹⁹ and they "may find migration to college towns and immersive four-year college experiences beyond their personal comfort as well as beyond their financial capacity."²⁰ Additionally, rural youth often have lower aspirations for education and a career, in part because they have less information about career opportunities and professions that require a college certificate or degree.²¹

As a result, school personnel are often among the few, if not the only, sources of information about college that students have access to in their communities. Problematically, though, not all high schools in rural communities have the resources necessary to provide adequate advising services to guide students through the college application process. **Arizona has the highest student-to-counselor ratio in the country.** The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) reports that, in 2015-16, the ratio was 903 students for every one school counselor in Arizona. ASCA recommends a ratio no higher than 250 to one.²² Exceedingly high caseloads, like those in Arizona, reduce the ability of school counselors to effectively support students and work with them to increase college access and readiness.



Five States with Highest Student Per Counselor Ratios, 2015-16



Source: ASCA²³

Many of the rural students interviewed by College Success Arizona emphasized the value of college advising and school counselors, saying the college advising services they receive from their counselors and college success coaches were their main sources of information about post-high school options. However, students also pointed to gaps in these services; as one student put it, “At the beginning of high school they don’t really care that much. They don’t really give that much advice in the beginning. In the last two years of high school, they start to encourage you. It’s not really fair to students that they don’t show this at the beginning. We need a plan from the beginning.”

The teacher and school counselor shortage in the state has an especially acute impact in rural schools and districts, affecting not only students’ access to timely college advising, but also their college readiness. For example, as one administrator describes it, some students “have not had a good math teacher their entire time in high school. Making up those core subject areas won’t happen overnight.” This statement is in keeping with National Rural Education Association research that suggests that rural areas may be more vulnerable than urban and suburban areas to capacity shortfalls, which owe largely to employing fewer staff and having a smaller pool of resources. Compounding this problem, and contributing to poor career readiness, is the fact that rural communities have fewer employment and internship opportunities for high school students than are available in urban and suburban areas.²⁴



The lack of visible postsecondary opportunities in rural Arizona communities—whether related to higher education or careers—makes it a challenge for students to learn about and plan for their options for the future, as well as to take the appropriate steps to achieve their goals after high school. Research indicates that postsecondary attainment in rural areas can be restricted by the lack of geographic proximity to postsecondary institutions. Rural students may find “migration to college towns and four-year college experiences beyond their personal comfort as well as beyond their personal financial capacity.”²⁵ And, for students who live in education deserts, more than 50 miles from the nearest postsecondary institution, this can mean the difference between getting a college education or not; for a large percentage of students, place “shapes college options.”²⁶

Many of the students and families we spoke to perceived their postsecondary options as limited to those within the state; they often cited certificate programs at nearby community colleges as their only real options. Proximity and familiarity play a key role in positioning community colleges as the first—and sometimes only—option that rural students consider. One administrator noted, for example, that “many of our students see going out-of-state as unattainable.”

At the same time, many students and their parents see moving away from their hometown as essential to success after high school. There is general agreement among students we talked to that there were limited options for them if they were to stay, and that the adults in their lives are strongly reinforcing the message that moving away from home was necessary in order to attain opportunities. As one student said, “I’ve been told my whole life that I needed to get out and make something of myself somewhere else.”

However, this imperative is complicated by the lack of information about career options that provide the kind of economic mobility that motivates students to look elsewhere for opportunities after high school. As one parent describes it, students “do well in school, but what they see in the community is what they know. They don’t see the kinds of things in this town that kids would see in the big city. You can work at the mine. You can be a cop. You can be a teacher. You could be a nurse. That’s all they know.”

VOICES FROM RURAL ARIZONA

“Many students across the country look at what their parents do or what is around them and think, ‘What I am going to do when I grow up?’ But there’s not a lot of that going on here.”

—Administrator



The Information Gap and College Affordability

The cost of higher education is a challenge for the majority of students, much less those who come from low-income families. Nearly every parent we talked to was aware that money can be a barrier to college. But these parents were less aware of how to navigate that barrier. Parents expressed their confusion about what different funding streams exist and how to qualify for financial aid. Parents noted that getting information on financial aid was the most important element in understanding the roadmap for college. Nonetheless, too few have the information they need. One administrator summed up the challenge by saying that students “who are highly successful, those parents are the ones who know the path. The kids who struggle have parents who are not helpful. Many parents think college is unattainable. They think they can’t afford that. So that’s a big factor.”

Additionally, parents aren’t aware of how to apply for scholarships. Many parents said that while they know that many scholarships exist, they did not understand what their specific options for scholarships might be, and they don’t know how to find scholarships.

The affordability barrier is further compounded by the fact that Arizona does not have a robust state sponsored need-based grant aid program. Because Arizona is not investing in its students and families—and despite a constitutional requirement to provide college education that is as near to free as is possible—the state has in effect abdicated that responsibility to the federal government, higher education institutions, and non-government organizations.

This is also a problem when it comes to informing students about their financial aid options. State need-based programs expand access to higher education by providing students with funding to help them afford to enroll in and complete a certificate or degree program. They also serve a broader function as channels for communicating important information about financial aid to students and families who might not otherwise learn about the options available to them.



CONCLUSION

Empowering Students and Communities in Rural Arizona

Arizona must show students in rural communities that we care about them and want them to succeed. Creating programs and policies that reduce the barriers to information and postsecondary opportunities represents an essential step in this direction.

Increasing postsecondary access and attainment is a clear priority in Arizona. The future of our state's economy depends on having an educated, skilled workforce capable of meeting the needs of industry and business. In recent decades we have been negligent, leaving students and parents in rural Arizona to navigate the higher education system, in all its complexity, without adequate supports. The result has been an inequitable distribution of educational opportunities and an information gap that leaves rural students with the perception that they do not have attainable options after they graduate from high school. To reverse this trend, it is essential that a coalition of stakeholders—including leaders from business, industry, and education—works to close the higher education information and opportunity gap that disadvantages rural students and communities.



The makeshift array of college access and success programs that serve students in rural Arizona do important work, but they are only part of the solution. The state needs a sustainable set of programs and policies that ensure students and families have the resources and guidance to understand their higher education options and how to access those that best align with their qualifications and ambitions. The right supports—such as timely, caring advising from knowledgeable school counselors—have the potential to increase postsecondary attendance and attainment among rural students and to reinvigorate rural communities with a renewed sense of opportunity within reach.

Above all, this requires building a stronger college-going culture that demonstrates, to students and parents alike, an ethos of care on the part of the education system and the state as a whole. We must show students

in rural communities—by providing them with the information, mentorship and guidance, and resources they need—that we value them and that we want them to succeed, both when they are in school and after they graduate. For too long rural students have been asked to make do and find their own ways to access vital information and opportunities.

We must transform the narrative about rural communities from one of neglect and insufficient opportunity, to one of hope, possibility, and prosperity. Thriving rural communities will be essential to the future of Arizona, just as they have been essential to its past. Efforts to ensure that the next generation of young people in rural Arizona benefits from greater opportunity should not be delayed.

VOICES FROM RURAL ARIZONA

“I’d like to be in an environment where they tell you what you need to do in high school that will make you successful after high school.”

—Student



Policy Recommendations

The prosperity of Arizona's communities, whether they be urban or rural or somewhere in between, is the lifeblood of our state. Ensuring that young people have equitable access, regardless of where they live, to the educational opportunities that will enable them to succeed in the Arizona workforce and benefit from the economic mobility that a college credential can lead to is an imperative we cannot ignore. Policymakers in the state—coordinating with business, industry, and education leaders—can prioritize addressing the information and opportunity gaps that diminish college-going in Arizona.

The state can develop and promote programs and policies designed to help students and families better understand their higher education options and make informed decisions about their future. This could ensure that every high school in Arizona has the capacity to provide advising and counseling services that help students and families navigate the higher education landscape accordingly. Such supports could also include developing and promoting additional, and more widely accessible, tools to help students understand what skills and credentials they will need to enter a given profession.

The state can ensure equitable and adequate K-12 funding to provide high-quality education opportunities to adequately prepare students for college. Rural schools and districts are particularly susceptible to resource reductions, which can leave them unable to provide vital educational services and unable to hire sufficient instructional, counseling, and support staff.

The state can maintain funding equalization for community colleges in rural areas. State funding is vital to the sustainability of rural community colleges, which are often the only visible college options in rural areas. For many rural students, community colleges are the main postsecondary option to either earn a credential or take courses that enable them to transfer to a four-year institution.

The state can create a new need-based grant aid program that provides flexible, portable funding to encourage and enable more young people throughout Arizona to pursue formal education credentials beyond high school. Such a program should go beyond support for students seeking a four-year degree to include students for whom a certificate or associate degree program—such as those provided by community colleges—is the best, or only, option.



Additional Resources on Rural Higher Education Access and Attainment Issues

- ▶ [Rural-Nonrural Differences in College Attendance Patterns](#)
- ▶ [The Geography of College Attainment: Dismantling Rural “Disadvantage”](#)
- ▶ [Postsecondary Education Expectations and Attainment of Rural and Non-rural Students](#)
- ▶ [Participation of Rural Youth in Higher Education: Factors, Strategies, and Innovations](#)
- ▶ [Uncovering the Tripwires to Postsecondary Success](#)
- ▶ [The Effects of Rurality on College Access and Choice](#)
- ▶ [Addressing the Unique Challenges of Urban and Rural Schools](#)
- ▶ [Why Rural Matters](#)
- ▶ [Rural Community College Student Perceptions of Barriers to College Enrollment](#)



Endnotes

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