



Exploring How Rural Students in Oregon Make Decisions About Education and Training after High School

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About Education Northwest

Education Northwest is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping all children and youth reach their full potential. We partner with public, private, and community-based organizations to address educational inequities and improve student success. While most of our work centers on the Pacific Northwest, our evaluations, technical assistance, and research studies have national impact and provide timely and actionable results.

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Executive Summary

This study builds on a previous study conducted by The Ford Family Foundation and Education Northwest, “[Supporting Rural Students in Oregon in High School and Beyond](#).” That study relied on student-level quantitative data and found that rural students in Oregon had lower rates of college enrollment, persistence, and completion than nonrural students and that this pattern held across student groups. In the graduating class of 2018–19, only 42 percent of rural students enrolled immediately in college after high school, compared to 56 percent of nonrural students. Given that rural students make up nearly half of all high school graduates in Oregon, it is critical that we understand how rural students make decisions about education and training after high school and how to support rural students’ academic and career goals.

While it is important to examine differences based on rurality—in part because it allows us to provide better support to these communities and schools—it may also lead to deficit-based notions about rural students and, by extension, rural communities. In fact, rural communities have many positive assets, often providing students with strong support networks, deep connections to place, and a sense of pride in self and community (Means et al., 2016; NORC, 2018). To gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of why and how rural high school students make decisions about life after high school and choose certain pathways, it is essential to examine these more asset-based factors and to hear directly from rural students and the adults who support them.

This study fills that gap. Education Northwest conducted interviews and focus groups with 53 participants, including rural high school seniors and their parents/caregivers, rural high school staff members, college students from rural upbringings, and college staff members who support and work with rural students. The study focuses on 10 rural high schools in Oregon including two schools from Southern Oregon, two from Central Oregon, one from the Metro region, three from Valley North Coast, and two from Eastern Oregon. We also consulted an advisory group of four rural high school staff members, four college staff members who support rural students, and one college student from a rural community. The advisory group provided feedback on the research plan, study protocols, outreach and recruitment efforts, and framing of the study findings.

Key Learnings

Student participants in the study pursued a variety of pathways, including college degree or certificate programs, training programs, joining the U.S. Navy, and entering the workforce. This study explores how they made these decisions, challenges they faced with pursuing education and training pathways after high school, systems that supported their decision-making, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we value all the pathways students choose to pursue, this study examines the college degree pathway in more detail and describes barriers to and supports for rural students’ college completion.

Rural high school students face several challenges to making informed decisions about their postsecondary education and training pathways.

- **The primary challenge mentioned by students in the study was the perceived high cost and potential debt associated with attending college.** Students who had chosen to pursue the college pathway mentioned the necessity of working to pay for some of the costs of college, the tremendous amount of time they spent finding and applying for scholarships, and the overriding fear of assuming massive amounts of debt.
- **Students need more exposure to information about a variety of pathways.** Students shared that their high schools focused largely on college degree pathways and neglected other options such as entering the workforce, enrolling in training programs, and joining the military.
- **Parents/caregivers did not always know how to support their child with the complicated processes of applying for and enrolling in college,** and high school staff members found it difficult to connect with families on this topic. In addition, high school staff members felt strongly that students needed much more support at home when it comes to pursuing their pathways after high school.
- **Some students who planned to pursue college after high school did not ultimately enroll due to a lack of support while transitioning.** In addition, high school staff members described the difficulty of continuing to support students after they have graduated, including support with enrollment in college courses and various financial burdens, such as moving costs.
- **The COVID-19 pandemic impacted both student motivation for attending college and adult support for doing so.** Students mentioned the negative impact of isolation, such as not being able to hang out with

friends or engage in extracurricular activities and athletics. High school staff members said the pandemic had limited their ability to engage students in normal school practices that support decision-making, such as providing exposure to community partners and employers.

Rural high school students appear to benefit from four key supports.

- **Students benefit from taking a college and career pathways class.** These classes help students explore a wide variety of pathways and allow high school staff members to follow up with more targeted resources and supports based on students' interests.
- **Students benefit from high school staff members who provide both encouraging and hands-on support.** High school staff members in this study did not favor one pathway over another, but rather tried to ensure students were informed and had the support they needed for whatever pathways they pursued. This personalized support could include anything from sharing scholarship opportunities to writing letters of recommendation to connecting students with employers.
- **Students benefit from parents and caregivers who provide encouragement, support, and connections to broader social networks.** Conversations with high school students and parents/caregivers revealed that familial support is often centered around encouragement and social networks and less around technical processes such as applying for scholarships, taking college entrance exams, and completing financial aid forms.
- **Students benefit from exposure to college via dual credit programs, college visits, and college presence at the high school.** Such exposure increases student interest in pursuing college. Multiple study participants called out dual credit programs as a vital resource and form of support that often had a strong influence on students' decisions to pursue college.

Rural students pursuing a college degree often experience challenges related to culture shock and appear to benefit from a variety of supports provided by colleges.

- **Many rural students face culture shock when entering college**, which can lead to difficulty in making connections on campus, performing well academically, navigating through institutional systems (e.g., registration and financial aid processes), and balancing competing demands.
- While supports for rural students in college are not always clearly defined as such, rural students appear to benefit from a wide variety of programs geared toward student success in general, including **first-year seminar, bridge/transition programs, basic needs support, first-generation college student programs, and federally supported TRIO programs.**

Recommendations

Based on the findings, we provide recommendations for high schools, colleges, and universities across Oregon that serve significant numbers of rural students.

Rural high schools and colleges should build systems of support that increase exposure to postsecondary education and training pathways for students and families.

- **Increase professional development opportunities for college and rural high school staff members.** If professional development opportunities can be standardized and implemented across Oregon high schools—and then expanded into colleges and universities—then staff members would have a deeper understanding of the barriers rural students face and how best to support them.
- **Increase college pricing transparency for students and families.** With student loan debt being a major concern, more transparency around the true costs of college for both students and families would help them make informed decisions.
- **Leverage existing college resources, programs, and advising to better support rural students.** Colleges in Oregon could leverage existing supports and tailor them to rural student needs, with a focus on improving students' ability to make connections, perform well academically, and navigate various institutional structures.
- **Increase exposure to college at rural high schools.**
 - Developing and expanding **high school-college partnerships** would alleviate the burden on high school staff members and increase the support colleges provide to high schools.
 - Partnerships centering **dual enrollment** may also find that students develop a greater sense of belonging toward college and may feel more comfortable pursuing this pathway.
 - **Easing the transition** into college for rural students would promote success, as it does for low-income and first-generation students. Such transitional support may foster students' sense of belonging on campus, help build relationships with peers and staff members, and increase their knowledge of college culture including the ability to navigate financial aid processes and course registration.
- **Increase family engagement at rural high schools.** Family-school partnerships are a way to share information about college-going processes, such as filling out financial aid forms and completing college applications.

Contents

Executive Summary	i
Introduction	1
Key Learnings	4
Next Steps to Support Rural Student Decision-Making	19
References	22
Appendix A. Methodology	23

.....

Tables

Table 1. Study sample	3
Table 2. High school participants' pathways	4

Introduction

Oregon has many vibrant rural communities in all regions of the state. Nearly two-thirds of Oregon's public high schools are in rural areas, and 42 percent of Oregon high school students attend a rural high school (Riggs et al., 2021). In addition to shedding light on the breadth and diversity of the rural high school student population, our recent study, "[Supporting Rural Students in Oregon in High School and Beyond](#)" found that rural students in Oregon have lower rates of college enrollment, persistence, and completion compared to nonrural students. In particular, college enrollment rates for rural male students in Oregon have declined dramatically compared to those of their nonrural peers, and the decline is even more pronounced when intersected with race and family income.

To gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of rural students' pathways after high school, Education Northwest and The Ford Family Foundation partnered on this companion study. This study uses qualitative data to examine how rural students make decisions about education and training after high school and how to support rural students' academic and career goals.

Why explore rural high school students' decision-making processes about their education and training pathway after high school?

Much can be discovered from exploring **rural community assets**. For example, individual assets, including civic and community engagement (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; NORC, 2018) and relationships and connections with people (Crespo et al., 2011) can foster a close-knit community that can facilitate a vast support network for rural students (Means et al., 2016). Organizational assets, including faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, schools, and businesses (NORC, 2018; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), help to anchor these communities and generate wealth that stays

within the community. Cultural assets, including pride in self, community, and family allow many rural residents to feel deep connection to their community (NORC, 2018).

Oregon findings on rural assets mirror these national findings. In a recent survey, Oregon rural residents placed greater importance on their connection to community, their natural environment, and their location in Oregon, as compared to urban residents (The Ford Family Foundation, 2022). Oregon rural residents also reported feeling community pride at higher rates than urban residents.

Each of these individual, organizational, and cultural assets can help to uncover why and how rural high school students make decisions about life after high school and choose certain pathways. Choosing not to attend college is often regarded as an "uninformed decision" and a deficit. In keeping with that mindset, the dominant college-going culture in many high schools does little to prepare students for direct entry into the labor market, occupational community college certificate programs, or trade schools (DeLuca et al., 2016). Despite this emphasis, rural students, low-income students, and students of color are increasingly entering these non-college pathways.

Keeping in mind rural community assets, it is also important to recognize rural and nonrural disparities to identify ways to support rural communities and schools. In Oregon and nationally, there are disparities in educational opportunities for rural and nonrural students. About 21 percent of the rural population aged 25 or over earned a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 36 percent of adults in nonrural regions (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2023). According to our [previous report](#), in the past five years, the gap between rural college enrollment and non-rural college enrollment in Oregon has increased. In the graduating class of 2018–19, only 42 percent of rural students enrolled

immediately in college after high school, compared to 56 percent of nonrural students. Given that rural students make up nearly half of all high school graduates in Oregon, low college enrollment among rural students will make it difficult for Oregon to reach its stated goal of 80 percent of Oregonians completing a four-year or two-year degree or credential by year 2025 (Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2018).

As discussed in detail in our [previous report](#), rural schools are often under-resourced and face barriers related to family income (Byun et al., 2012; Meece et al., 2013), community poverty (Farrigan, 2018), lack of exposure to college, and lack of access to advanced coursework (Education Commission of the United States, 2017; Ratledge et al., 2020). In some rural communities these challenges make it difficult to provide the knowledge and skills necessary for their students to make informed decisions about life after high school.

These challenges are often exacerbated by the policies and practices of higher education institutions and other parts of the education system. For example, research has shown that higher education institutions target their college access efforts toward white, higher income communities (Jaquette & Salazar, 2018). Additionally, while accelerated learning options such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual and concurrent enrollment are associated with higher college success, there is inequitable access to these opportunities for rural high school students (Education Commission of the United States, 2017; Ratledge et al, 2020). In Oregon, schools in nonrural locations have much higher AP and IB participation than rural high schools (Hodara & Pierson, 2018).

The pandemic may have exacerbated disparities between rural and nonrural students. While there is still little data around rural college enrollment in Oregon post-pandemic, we do know that the overall proportion of students going to college has decreased since 2019, both nationally and in Oregon (Berg et al., 2023). In Oregon, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, college enrollment rates have decreased by nearly 16 percentage points from 2019 to 2023. In 2020, the number of rural students who completed the FAFSA dropped by 18 percent (National College Attainment Network, 2021). Several factors could have contributed to the lower college enrollment rates for rural students during the pandemic. As our findings in this study reveal, many students began working during the pandemic and decided to continue working.

While examining rural and nonrural disparities allows us to identify ways to support these communities and schools, they often lead to deficit notions of rural students and, by extension, rural communities. As such, this report pays attention to rural assets and explores the information rural students are presented with, how they make decisions based on that information, and ways to better support rural students in becoming informed decision-makers about the education and training pathways they pursue after high school.

Study Methods

This study involved 10 rural high schools in Oregon, including two schools from Southern Oregon, two from Central Oregon, one from the Metro region, three from Valley North Coast, and two from Eastern Oregon. From these high schools, we conducted one-on-one interviews with high school seniors and their parents/caregivers; focus groups with high school staff; focus groups with college students, many of whom were alumni of the 10 high schools; and focus groups with college staff members (table 1). Details around how sites and participants were selected can be found in appendix A.

TABLE 1. Study sample

Participants	Type of interview	Length of interview	Total participants
College bound high school senior*	One-on-one	30–45 minutes	11
Non-college bound high school senior**	One-on-one	30 minutes	8
Parent/caregiver	One-on-one	30 minutes	8
High school staff member	Focus groups	60 minutes	9
College student	Focus groups	60 minutes	10
College staff member	Focus groups	60 minutes	7
Total			53

*College bound refers to student who explicitly stated plans of pursuing college and have taken steps to pursue college (e.g., working on college applications, submitted FAFSA).

**Non-college bound refers to student who explicitly stated plans of pursuing a route other than a college degree (e.g., trade programs, workforce, military).

We included rural voices from across Oregon and from rural schools that largely serve a low-income student population and/or students of color. However, having a representative sample of rural high school students across Oregon was not the goal of this work. Instead, the study team tried to highlight rural family, school staff, and student voices to understand rural student decision-making practices. This study also included an advisory group made up of high

school staff members from rural high schools, college staff members at rural-serving colleges and universities, and a community college student from a rural upbringing. The advisory group provided feedback on the study design, instruments, and report. Facilitating an advisory group allowed us to ensure a rich, culturally responsive qualitative project that was aligned to the culture and context of rural Oregon.

Key Learnings

We organized key learnings into four areas: pathways students choose and influential factors, challenges rural students face in pursuing an education or training pathway after high school, systems of support that lead to informed decision-making about education and training pathways after high school, and barriers and supports for rural students in college. Throughout each area, we center the experiences, voices, stories, and recommendations of students, staff, and families across rural Oregon.

Pathways students choose and influential factors.

When asked about the types of pathways students at the rural high schools in the study typically pursue after graduating high school, both high school staff members and students mentioned pathways that were commonly available within the community. In addition to college, this included logging, commercial fishing, auto and other kinds of mechanics, electrician or electrical lineman, farming, shipping, the railroad, and the military.

“We have a lot of logging companies. Fishing is very big. And then we also have a local mill that a lot of [students] go right to work there.”

High school staff member

Responses often varied by the rurality of the school. For example, a staff member from a smaller high school located in a rural valley said students were not exposed to many options because of their remote location. These students were only aware of options presented to them by the school or their families. Students from larger schools were exposed to more options because of their proximity to more urban areas.

The specific pathways of students within the study included college degrees, certificate and training programs at a vocational/trade organization, joining the Navy, and entering the workforce (table 2).

TABLE 2. High school participants’ pathways

Student pathways	Number of students
<i>Education and training pathways</i>	
College degree pathway	11 attending a two or four-year degree-granting college or university after high school
Training pathway	2 pursuing a trade or certificate program at a vocational/trade organization
<i>Alternative Pathways</i>	
Military, straight into the workforce, and undecided	1 joining the U.S. Navy 3 entering the workforce (e.g., working in family business) 2 are undecided

Source: Authors’ analysis of participants’ self-reported interview data (n = 19).

Overall, only two students who participated in the study had at least one parent who had completed a college degree, and both of those students were college bound. No students pursuing training, the military, or workforce, or who were undecided had a parent who had completed college. Thus, parents’ education levels appeared to have a large influence on their child’s awareness and decision-making about their pathway after high school.

Challenges rural students face with pursuing an education and training pathway after high school.

By far, family and finances had the most influence on rural students' decisions about education and training pathways after high school. All students and staff members at both the high school and college levels also mentioned parents—and families more generally—as having a strong impact on students' decisions. Meanwhile, financial obligations or fear of financial burden were mentioned by almost all study participants.

This section describes four challenges rural high school students faced in deciding on a pathway after high school: perceived high costs of college among students, limited exposure to information for students, difficulty among parents and caregivers in supporting students, and lack of support for students while transitioning into college. It also discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' decision-making.

Some students chose not to pursue college due to perceived high costs and potential debt.

As previously mentioned, research shows that rural communities have higher poverty rates than other, more urban, communities (Farrigan, 2020). Students pursuing alternative pathways discussed the high costs of college and potential debt as deterrents to pursuing college.

“I want to go to college, that’s something I do want to try to go for, but for now I do want to make sure I have money to do that so that way I don’t get into a large student debt.”

High school student

Many students pursuing workforce routes discussed viable options in their community that paid well, which led them to determine that the benefits of attending college did not outweigh the costs. They suggested that being able to make money right after high school, without accruing debt, was more beneficial.

“I feel like the cost-to-benefit ratio isn’t as good as maybe going out and starting your own business, doing a trade or something where I can start making money instantly after high school and then moving on to something bigger later on.”

High school student

High school staff members corroborated these sentiments.

“To [students], it’s just a huge price tag. [They say] ‘We don’t have the money. I don’t want to go into debt a lot.’ I’m surprised a lot of them talk about debt. And [they say], ‘I don’t want to be in debt. I’m going to go work for this company, and they’re going to pay me 20 bucks an hour.’”

High school staff member

Staff members also shared that during the COVID-19 pandemic, many students began working full time and experienced what it was like to earn a sizeable paycheck. Accordingly, after quarantine was over, students wanted to continue making money and, again, did not believe the benefits of attending college outweighed the costs. Some students, staff members suggested, even had difficulty returning to school and focusing on their high school class work.

“So many of our students, when we were completely remote, were working full-time jobs. They saw that money coming in, and they weren’t planning on going back to school. It’s still hard getting students to come back here regularly, and we’ve been in-person for a while now.”

High school staff member

Additionally, other high school staff members shared that students were often deterred by the “sticker price” of tuition at four-year universities, which in some cases prevented them from considering local community colleges as an option, as well. Ultimately, according to high school staff members, students did not understand the financial support they could potentially receive (e.g., Oregon Promise).

Even students who were planning to pursue college were worried about the cost. These students discussed needing to work to pay for some of the costs of college, the amount of time and effort it took to find scholarships, and an overriding desire to avoid debt. For example, one student described why financial barriers might ultimately prevent them from pursuing their college plans.

“Probably money, just because we have a really big family ... And with my parents not going to college and only having that job—it pays good, but not enough to feed eight people and then, on top of that, send someone to college. So, it’s money, of all things, would probably be my biggest [obstacle].”

High school student

Students need more exposure to information about various pathways.

During students’ senior year of high school, staff members work to prepare students for their pathways after graduation. However, students shared that in many cases, their high school focused largely on college degree pathways and neglected other pathways including the workforce, trade and certificate programs at a vocational/trade organization, and the military. Students felt like the burden was on them to search for more information about these non-college pathways. Students also shared that the focus on college degree pathways creates pressure on them. For example, when asked what recommendations they might have for their school, one student shared,

“I feel like less leaning on ‘Go to college or you’re not going to get a good job,’ because they do lean on that a little bit. And if you lean on that a little less, it won’t make kids feel super pressured that they have to go to college. I do feel college is a good thing to go to if you want a job that requires college credits, but if you don’t need to, don’t go. Because if you can find a job doing some construction or something, then go to a trade school, too. Those are very helpful.”

High school student

While students felt that their high school did not provide enough information about pathways other than college, high school staff members shared that there is a lack of understanding of the degree or certificate students would need for their desired career pathways. For example, one high school staff member shared that students would often come to them expressing interest in careers that needed a college degree, but they did not want to continue in school.

“I feel like I’ve had to really convince students that they can pursue college because they talk about wanting to have future careers that require college education, but then they’re like, ‘Ugh, school. I don’t want to do more school. School’s hard. School sucks.’ ... A lot of them won’t even come to speak with me or listen to me when I present in the class because they’re just already with their ideas of, ‘It’s school. I don’t like it. I don’t want it.’ But they do want the higher pay, and they want those careers.”

High school staff member

As previously mentioned, rurality can impact student exposure and access to information about various pathways. Some staff members described their community as being extremely remote, which makes it difficult for students to be exposed to a broad range of opportunities. One staff member shared,

“There just aren’t a lot of jobs for them in high school to get any kind of experience. So, they’re leaving high school without experience in any kind of job at all or doing an internship ... It’s just hard to connect them to things that are related to a career they want to do. Someone wanted to be a massage therapist, so they had to do it in [redacted], which is 40 miles away. And so being able to support students in getting internship-type opportunities or just jobs, in general, is something that is a barrier for us and a way we could support them better if we could.”

High school staff member

Additionally, high school staff members also lack the capacity and resources to truly support every student. Often, staff members have to wear multiple hats, such as being both a counselor and a teacher. One staff member shared,

“Maybe one of the biggest barriers for our student population is just lack of information. And it’s not because we haven’t worked hard to get the information out. It’s just, well, just like everybody’s dealing with not enough people, not enough hours in the day to reach kids ... So, that’s a barrier because kids just don’t know what’s available to them and what they need to know.”

High school staff member

While no one spoke about issues of staff turnover, a few staff members who participated in the study were new to their role. And in a few instances, students spoke about difficulties in communicating with counselors, particularly new ones. Additionally, some students believed their counselor did not know how to support them based on their identity. For example, one student shared an experience in which they believed their high school counselor did not have experience working with students of their identity, so this student had to look for support in other places. Similar to other students, this student said they relied on their parents/caregivers to provide most of the support for their pathways beyond high school. However, parents/caregivers did not always feel equipped to support their children with the supports they needed, as discussed in the next section.

Parents/caregivers did not always know how to support their child with the process of pursuing college, and high school staff members found it difficult to connect with families.

Parents and families had a large influence on the pathways students pursued after high school but did not always know how to provide the support their child needed, particularly with the technical processes related to a desired pathway. About half of the students who participated in this study did not have a parent who had attended any college (9 students), while the other half of students had at least one parent who had attended some college (8 students). Only two students had more than one parent who had completed a college degree. When it came to completing the FAFSA, college applications, and other college-going processes, parents and caregivers needed additional information and support. When discussing the high school counselor's impact on their child, one parent shared,

“I appreciate it so much because I’m like, ‘I can’t help you because I don’t know this.’ I feel like a failure because parents are supposed to know, and I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh, this is harder than I thought.’”

Parent

Another grandparent shared similar sentiments and wanted more information to better help their child,

“I would definitely like to have more information. My safe zone to direct people to is I tell them, ‘Stay on your school’s website line of resources, because that’s where they can link you up to other resources and scholarships and grants ... versus just trying to Google on the internet for other websites that you can encounter that are false or not legit.’”

Grandparent

High school staff members believe that students need much more support at home when it comes to pursuing their pathways after high school. While staff members tried to host family nights and get as much information as possible to parents/caregivers, they often found it difficult to connect with families.

“We can make things happen, but we don’t have the time and the capacity. Even when we do host a family night or a financial aid night for them to learn ... participation is really low. So, we can provide it. We try to provide it to reach every single one of them to educate them on the truths of financial aid and that the money is there ... but we just don’t have the capacity to truly educate them—to take the families to the universities and visit for themselves so they can see people like them there to learn the stories of other people who have gotten it paid for completely. I feel like just sharing those testimonies could really help.”

High school staff member

High school staff members also discussed the FAFSA as a barrier for students, particularly first-generation students. One staff member shared,

“Say if it’s the first kid in the family who’s wanting to go to college, their first experience with the FAFSA. Number one, it really isn’t very user-friendly as much as they try to make it that way. It’s just not. And so, especially if you’re coming from a family where maybe you’re a first-generation prospective college student, that can seem like a barrier for parents, and they give up.”

The other part is, in some ways, it does feel kind of invasive. And when you're not really familiar with that type of stuff, then it can leave them questioning, 'I don't know. I just don't want to fill this out. I don't trust it, or I don't know enough about it.' And so that's another reason why they might just give up. So, I would say FAFSA's non-user-friendly format can really be kind of a barrier."

High school staff member

Other high school staff members also shared that some families have a distrust of the government, which creates barriers for filling out the FAFSA. Staff also specified this as a barrier for people who are undocumented.

Additionally, conversations with advisory group members¹ revealed that there may be additional pressures placed on men in the household. One advisory group member stated, "There is a societal expectation around being a man and providing for the family," which can inform their decisions around pursuing college or going straight to work to provide for their families. This is particularly interesting because rural male students are enrolling into college at lower rates than rural female students across Oregon.

Some students who plan to pursue college after high school do not ultimately enroll due to a lack of support, particularly in rural areas, while transitioning during the summer.

High school staff members believed that many students ended up not enrolling in college—or leaving college in their first semester—due to a lack of transition support.

"I know that we are losing a lot of kids. They're just falling through the cracks because they're not ... I don't know if it's that they're not prepared, that they don't have the support they need. I wish we had more bodies, or more people, that we could follow up with those kids that freshman year, 'Hey, do you need help with anything? Can we get you in contact with someone?' I don't know how you would do that with our current staffing."

High school staff member

Further, rural students, specifically, often have work obligations that make it difficult for them to take advantage of any transition support or programs that are provided in the summer. As one college staff member shared,

"[Summer programs] can be a barrier for students who can't afford to take off time. For example, [we have] our Summer Bridge Program. That means reporting to campus before September 9th, and that's giving up a couple of weeks of being able to work. And for our rural students who work on farms, that's harvest time. Families really can't afford for their kids to be not participating in harvest. So, I don't think we're doing enough to really support those students, if I'm being completely transparent."

College staff member

¹ The advisory group included teachers, counselors, and students in rural communities, who provided the research team with feedback throughout the project. More information about the use of an advisory group can be found in appendix A.

High school staff members also shared that it was difficult to continue supporting students during the critical period between their graduation from high school and their entrance into college in the fall. Often, tasks come up during the summer, such as enrolling in courses and dealing with moving costs. High school staff noted that extra support is needed during the summer to help rural students follow through with their plans.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted both student motivation for attending college and high school support for doing so.

Student participants in this study experienced the COVID-19 pandemic during their freshman and sophomore years of high school. Accordingly, the pandemic had huge implications on the decisions they were making regarding their pathways after high school. Advisory group members specifically discussed witnessing the motivation of male students decrease drastically during the pandemic. As mentioned, many students worked during the pandemic, which made it difficult to transition back into in-person learning. Moreover, the pandemic impacted their motivation, grades, and social lives. Students discussed not being able to hang out with friends or engage in extracurricular activities and athletics as impacting their motivation.

“I had a whole bunch of camps I was going to do for football and just things like that. And obviously everything got stripped. So, obviously I feel like I needed that little development time to get into high school and [understand] how things work and things like that because I wasn’t really taking nothing serious up until that point. And honestly, I just ran away from my computer, I was in a whole different city [for] a while. So, I didn’t care, I didn’t mind until it affected me.”

High school student

During the pandemic, grading varied across schools with some schools taking a “pass/no pass” approach and others still giving letter grades. Still, high school staff members believed that while it was easier for students to perform well during the pandemic, they still struggled to keep their grades up.

“Their grades during comprehensive distance learning—a lot of them were not very good. And because of other things ... They were taking care of the kids or different [circumstances] ... they didn’t have the motivation. They were home. So, unfortunately, while it [could have been] so easy for them to get amazing grades during COVID, a lot of them got straight F’s or just didn’t do school. And so that really impacted their trajectory and their options because of the GPA, because of lacking credits. I’m specifically talking about current seniors—that’s what I’m seeing this year because of things that happened then.”

High school staff member

Additionally, many students said they were not fully aware of the impact of the pandemic on their academic performance—and the implications of that—until after they returned to in-person schooling.

“I don’t think I was thinking about it as much because it was like school’s optional, and then you would hear all this news about colleges aren’t going to look at your grades anymore because of the pandemic. So, I was like, ‘Oh, well, I don’t really need to do it then.’ Then when it got back to in-person, it was like, ‘Oh wait, now my grades are going to be on my transcript, and I need to do this.’”

High school student

Meanwhile, high school staff members said the pandemic had limited their ability to provide the usual supports for student decision-making, such as exposure to community partners and employers.

“During [the pandemic] ... I would do things like mock interviews and bringing in community partners and business leaders to meet with students. But I couldn’t bring staff or non-staff into my building, or they had to show they were vaccinated ... I couldn’t do group interviews because they couldn’t sit more than six feet apart. There were a lot of restrictions around COVID, which were fine, but it made it a challenge to get students access to people and for people to come into the building. So, there was this whole chunk of time where the kinds of things that schools can do were really limited.”

High school staff member

Many students shared that being able to talk to people in their desired pathways, whether college or career, was beneficial to them. The inability of high schools to provide that support during the pandemic negatively impacted students’ ability to be fully informed. In addition, some study participants and advisory group members said they had noticed a stronger negative impact on the motivation of male-identifying students. And participants felt that the pandemic had exacerbated many of the barriers rural communities and schools were already facing.

While rural high school students face many challenges to making informed decisions about their future pathways, there are many kinds of support that have proven effective. The next section discusses these supports.

Systems of support that lead to informed decision-making practices about education and training pathways after high school.

High schools, families, and colleges are all working diligently to provide students with the support they need to make informed decisions about their future pathways. This section describes four key components of these systems of support: college and career pathways courses required for high school seniors; encouragement and hands-on support from high school staff members; encouragement and support from parents and caregivers and access to their social networks; and exposure to college via dual credit, college visits, and college presence at the high school.

Many high schools offer seniors a college and career pathways class.

While high school students and staff alike expressed that students need more exposure to information about various opportunities and pathways after high school, rural high schools in Oregon are providing formalized school structures that help to provide more exposure to students. In fact, at least one student or staff member at seven out of the 10 schools discussed a college/career pathways class available to students. Mainly, high schools require their seniors to take a class focused on college and career pathways during their first semester of their senior year. This course supports students on all pathways and provides resources and connections to students based on their varying pathways. One high school student shared,

“Well, our college prep class ended last semester, but basically, our teacher would go over scholarships that were going on. But he also did this step-by-step thing, habits that would help get us into good habits and stuff like that. And keeping things organized for college. For the kids that didn’t know really what they wanted to do, he made us do a research project on what career would fit us best, and then made us research the career that we got.”

High school student

This student went on to state how that research project helped them decide their chosen pathways after high school. Similarly, other students from other high schools shared that the supports this class provided really helped them to complete the technical processes of pursuing their pathways. For example, students pursuing college discussed that this class helped them complete college applications, FAFSA, and scholarship applications. Students pursuing other pathways shared that this class helped them figure out what they wanted to do and, in some instances, connected them to employers and provided job shadowing opportunities. While students find success with college and career classes, capacity constraints at high schools can impact the quality, consistency, and availability of those classes for all students.

High school staff members provide both encouragement and hands-on support to students (e.g., sharing scholarship opportunities, writing letters of recommendation).

While capacity and resources are limited, the high school staff members we spoke to were doing all they could to encourage and motivate students and to provide personalized, hands-on support for pursuing the pathway of their choice. These staff members did not appear to favor one pathway over another. Rather, they tried to ensure students were informed and had the supports they needed regardless of the pathway they pursued.

“Our biggest thing here at the high school, and especially in our department, is to make sure that students have a plan. There was a huge push for college—everyone should be going to college. And college is great. I have a bachelor’s degree. I think college is great. But college is not for everyone, and in order to be successful, you don’t have to go to college. We’ve seen so many people that are very successful, especially in the trades. They’re making good money, good benefits without having

to do the four-year degree path. So, our goal is to make sure that every student leaves here with a plan that’s the best plan for them, and that they know they can always come back to us if they need help. We don’t see just 9th through 12th, we see graduates, as well, coming in and getting help with the FAFSA now that they’re ready to go to school and things like that.”

High school staff member

Further, when high school staff members noticed that students were interested in pursuing particular fields, they tried to bring representatives from those fields to campus.

“Just this year we started a class for students interested in the medical profession. We have guest speakers, and they’re now going to the hospital, too. They’re seeing all aspects of the medical field, from entry-level positions that you just need a high school diploma for all the way up through doctors.”

High school staff member

Staff members from other high schools discussed similar experiences, such as bringing military recruiters to campus for students interested in pursuing those routes. One student shared that a military recruiter visiting their high school connected them to a Navy recruiter because the student was interested in pursuing that branch of service.

While parents/caregivers may not always know how to provide hands-on, technical support (e.g., completing FAFSA) they do provide encouragement and connections to their social networks.

By far, students were most influenced by their parents and families regarding their pathways after high school. Research suggests that rural students' educational aspirations and college enrollment are based on their attitudes about and connections to both family and place (Agger et al., 2018). Similarly, this study showed how some rural students not pursuing college relied on their family connections and social networks to pursue pathways after high school. While some high school staff members believed that families (particularly those of first-generation students) pushed their children away from pursuing college, students who were first-generation college students discussed wanting to pursue college because they watched their parents/caregivers struggle financially. These families often pushed their children into pursuing colleges, as shared by this high school student,

“My dad works at a winery as a ranch hand. And so, I’ve kind of grown up seeing the kind of financial disparity he has endured. And he’s always told me, ‘You’re smart, you are capable, you can go to college, you have this privilege, you are an American citizen, you have a right to a higher education, so take advantage of that.’ I’ve always been reminded that he did not have the same opportunities as I do. So, I’m trying to make the best of that. I’m doing it for me, but also for him.”

College student

These sentiments were shared by other first-generation students, and particularly students with immigrant parents. Further, students who pursued college often chose majors that were impacted by their parents and/or extended families. For

example, students who pursued veterinary or animal science often grew up on a farm and helped their family with animals.

Parents/caregivers and students discussed families as being supportive regardless of the students' chosen pathway.

“Right now, she’s just really indecisive. She knows that she’s going to be supported [in] whatever she does. I would like to see her go to a trade school, go to college, or even the military is fine, just something a little extra after high school. I don’t want her to go straight to work. I would like her to have a bit of an education. So, her dad and I both are ... Neither one of us went to college and we do fine ... but with that educational background, we could have done a little better. And so, we want to make sure that she gets going on the right foot. As adults sometimes we do change careers, sometimes we change our minds, and that’s OK. But even if she decided to become an electrician and then decided, well, I don’t really want to do that anymore, if she could afford to go back to school or make that leap into something else, it would make my heart feel better.”

Parent

Students further discussed how the encouragement their families provided and the support they received impacted their own motivation and success. Additionally, students pursuing workforce pathways often had parents or extended family members who owned businesses or had broader social networks that they could draw on to provide support in a given field.

“Eventually, I would like to take over my uncle’s business. He’s a kind of a contractor for Nike and Intel, and so working in construction and that sort of thing, being a manager, is my end career goal ... I ended up meeting with my uncle one night, and he asked if I would come work with him for a year and live at his place. So, I couldn’t really turn down that offer.”

High school student

High school staff members shared that families do not always support their children or are too busy to do so. However, conversations with high school students and parents/caregivers revealed that parental/familial support goes beyond knowing the technical processes of student pathways and is deeply rooted in the social networks and affirmations and supports families provide.

Exposure to college via dual credit, college visits, and college presence at the high school increases student interest in pursuing college

Students and staff members discussed the impact of college visibility at high schools on students’ interest in pursuing college. Dual enrollment, in particular, was seen as a vital resource and form of support that influenced students’ decision to pursue college,

“Having those [dual enrollment classes] available to me was very helpful. At my school they would pay for you to take a certain amount of classes at the community college. And so, I ended up taking a college class over the summer, a math class, and actually being in a real college class. That really helped prepare me for college. I mean, just little things like how to work Canvas or how college professors operate differently than high school teachers. Very helpful.”

College student

While only 66 percent of rural high schools offered dual credit courses during the 2018–19 school year compared to 73 percent of non-rural high schools (Riggs et al., 2020), other research has shown that dual enrollment is related to positive student outcomes (Hodara & Pierson, 2018). In fact, during the 2018–19 school year, rural students who took college coursework while enrolled in high school (65%) were more likely to enroll in, persist, and complete college than rural students who did not take college coursework during high school (36%; Riggs et al., 2021). Other college students shared that dual enrollment coursework also put them ahead once they got to college. Further, some high school staff members discussed personally taking students to visit colleges. In some instances, for the very remote schools, this was the first time students were exposed to areas outside of their community. Other high school staff members discussed having college recruiters come to the high school to provide more exposure to students. Both opportunities were easier to provide before the COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed by high school staff members, who have been working hard to bring back these practices post-pandemic.

Barriers to and supports for rural students’ college completion.

While we pay close attention to college pathways and the supports needed to pursue, transition into, and complete a college degree, we are careful not to position college as the only viable or successful pathway for rural students in Oregon. Instead, we center the study’s learnings around what it means for rural students in Oregon to be informed decision-makers about education and training pathways after high school. Specifically, our key learnings reveal that students need to have all the information necessary for all possible pathways after high school and select the one that aligns with their goals. Nonetheless, given the reality of the benefits of a college degree, which include a greater likelihood of employment, higher earnings over time, increased civic engagement, less reliance on public assistance, increased engagement in children’s activities, and healthier lifestyles (Ma & Pender, 2023), we explored

college degree pathways in greater depth than other pathways. A limitation of this work, and an opportunity for future work, is the lack of perspectives and voices from rural high school alumni currently in a pathway that is not college.

Once in college, whether community college or university, rural students often face barriers related to culture shock, which impact their ability to make connections, perform well academically, navigate institutional systems, and receive basic needs support. Nonetheless, students in this study were able to participate in programs that supported their success including first year seminars, bridge/transition programs, basic needs support, and first-generation programs. This section dives deeper into the barriers and supports rural students in Oregon face while in college.

Rural students often experience culture shock when entering college.

Our recent [quantitative study](#) found that rural students tended to persist in college at lower rates than their nonrural peers—a finding that held across student groups, including race/ethnicity, English language learner status, and eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch (Riggs et al., 2021). In focus groups, we asked college students and college staff members to reflect on the challenges rural students face when transitioning to college. Across all participants, four common themes emerged.

Making connections on campus

Rural communities often foster a close-knit culture that provides social networking opportunities for students (Means et al., 2016). However, in interviews, students and staff members shared that this asset can also lead to challenges for students transitioning to a college in a new region, including difficulty making connections on campus and feeling a sense of belonging. According to one college staff member,

“It’s easy to have those connections when this is all you’ve known, and these are the people you’ve gone to school with or grew up with in a community your entire life. And then when you’re taken out of that it can be intimidating. How do I form relationships? How do I make friendships? And so, when they show up to campus, they don’t have a person that they can feel comfortable going to and it can be really easy to feel out of place or that they don’t fit in.”

College staff member

In addition, feelings of insecurity and self-doubt among first-generation college students about their belonging in the college setting can impact their persistence in college. One focus group participant, who identified as a first-generation college student, described struggling with these feelings.

“I really, really struggled with imposter syndrome. I finished the first semester with a 4.0, and at the end I was like, how did I even do this? I don’t feel like I worked hard enough. I feel like I could have worked harder. I also struggled with feeling like I didn’t belong here. I was so overwhelmed with the amount of work.”

College student

Overall, difficulty making connections on campus and feeling out of place in the college setting can impact rural student retention. As one college staff member put it, “One of the biggest pieces we’re seeing in retaining students is whether or not they are comfortable talking to faculty and staff.”

Performing well academically

Researchers find disparities in rigorous academic opportunities for rural and nonrural students including inequitable access to advanced coursework opportunities. (Education Commission of the United States, 2017; Ratledge et al, 2020). Reflecting on their experiences in rural high schools, interviewees commented on this challenge, which can make rural students ill prepared for the increased rigor of college courses. As one college staff member described,

“There is a shock when they’re coming from a setting that maybe didn’t have the same academic rigor or opportunities just because they had such limited options there that students get into the college courses, and they suddenly start doubting all of their experiences. They go from being a big fish in a small pond to just being another little fish. And it’s that moment that we really see them falter.”

College staff member

Similarly, another college staff member noted challenges rural students face understanding how to study for exams. They reflected, “I’ve had a lot of students come and say, ‘I don’t know how to study for an exam; all our learning was done in class.’ The act of studying is very different at the high school level than at the university level.” According to interviewed college staff members, the adjustment between the academic rigor of high school and college can impact student retention.

Navigating institutional systems

In interviews, rural college students reflected on the difficulty of navigating institutional systems, such as advising, financial aid, and registration. Researchers find that it requires a certain “know-how” or skill set to navigate and succeed in the college environment (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Person, et al. 2006). Students who are the first in their family to attend college may not come to school with previous knowledge on how

certain college processes work (such as signing up for classes or completing financial aid forms) nor the social network where this information is accessible (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). As one first-generation college student described,

“No one in my family has ever gone to college. I’m the first one. I think with advising, I didn’t really know what to do. Just navigating [the college’s] website and system, I didn’t know that we had to pay for our student accounts or for basically our term or where to even find that or how to register for classes. I feel like, if they had something for students—almost a workshop on how to navigate the system and what you need to know to register for classes, what classes you need to take, and all of those things—that would have been really helpful for me as a freshman.”

College student

Researchers have found that first-generation students are more likely to employ engagement strategies that emphasize independence, rather than seeking help, which ultimately results in lower academic success (Yee, 2016). Likewise, although students face information barriers in college, college staff members reflect that students struggle to ask for help. As one college staff member described,

“I think there’s still an issue with knowing that you can ask for help. It’s one thing for there to be help. It’s another to think that I can ask and not be embarrassed [that I don’t know] something. Knowing that the resource is out there is definitely a struggle.”

College staff

Similar to existing research on first-generation college student experiences, we found that the rural students we interviewed faced challenges in navigating institutional structures and communicating with college faculty and staff members about their needs.

Receiving basic needs support

Interviews revealed that students struggle to balance multiple non-academic demands, such as work schedules, family responsibilities, and child care. Students shared the need for more help from their schools in determining the costs of tuition and living expenses and how to balance work in addition to school. For example, one student described being unaware of campus living costs when determining how much financial support they would need in the form of scholarships, grants, and loans.

“My main challenge was financial. My first year, nobody told me that living on campus costs more than your classes do. And I did receive a lot of money, but the money that was left over was really hard to come up with in three months. I tried getting in contact with a lot of people at school, but I felt like I could not get support. I really wanted to focus on my schoolwork, but that was not possible because of how much I had to work.”

College student

In addition, some of the college staff members we talked to noted that their campuses could do more to support students in balancing school and external responsibilities. As one staff member described,

“I’ll have students who do a term on and a term off, because they work, then they come back for a term, then they work, and

they’re flopping like that, which extends time to degree and cost. We have no child care facilities on this campus. I also want to say family, in the other way, not just having kids, but they’re very connected to their families, to their parents, to their grandparents. The obligation to family can pull them away from school.”

College staff member

Similarly, another college staff member reflected, “Work is so big, and it’s not just that they have a part- or full-time job. It’ll end at 2:00 a.m. and they’re here at 8:00 a.m. for classes ... we don’t have afternoon classes; we don’t have night classes. Those are things that might help [working students], but they don’t happen.”

Rural students benefit from programs geared toward student success (e.g., first year seminar, bridge/transition programs, basic needs support, first generation programs, TRIO).

Current college students and staff members emphasize the importance of developing relationships with peers, staff, advisors, and faculty in supporting students’ sense of community and helping them navigate campus and access academic and basic needs support. According to one college staff member, “The goal is that you would have at least someone in this context who knows your story, who knows your name, who knows who to ask about at home, who knows about your situation, and who can be an advocate and connector to resources.”

All 10 colleges in this study offered programs that supported students’ academic and basic needs or helped them make connections on campus and foster a sense of belonging. The programs included the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), the High School Equivalency Program (HEP), First Generation Scholars Program, Summer Bridge Program, TRIO, and other first-year experience and mentoring opportunities. It is worth noting that

federal programs, like TRIO, are not open to undocumented students, many of whom live in rural communities (Gonzales & Ruiz, 2014).

One student who participated in the First Generation Scholars Program described how it had helped them form relationships and had connected them to basic needs support.

“I was fortunate enough to be part of the First Generation Scholars Program. And through that I was paired with a staff mentor and then a peer mentor. It gave us a connection to somebody if we ever needed something, and they would also always reach out. With the program, I was able to move in a week early, before everyone else. We did different activities, and it did help getting to know other people who are first-generation. We talked about student debt. And then this month we are having a meeting on well-being. They also did informational stuff, so introducing us to financial aid, where to go if you needed housing assistance, or you need any kind of assistance.”

College student

College students and staff members describe how these college programs provided culturally responsive services to students, including hiring staff members that matched student demographics and communicating with their families about college culture and demands. One college staff member described the impact of these programs.

“[They] give [students] a sense of belonging, that sense of home. We’re your family here. And that helps a lot with our rural students that sometimes don’t make that connection and want to go home every weekend ... and telling families, ‘Your kid may call you every day. They won’t be able to call like they used to because certain amount of time they’re going to be studying for finals ...”

College staff member

Similarly, one interviewee, who participated in CAMP, reflected,

“[CAMP] has been extremely helpful. I feel like I would not be at [college] if it wasn’t for them. I know 100 percent I would not be, because if I did not have the support system that I had from them, I would not have made it far. It’s not even like ‘We’re going to help you do this and this with academics and finances.’ A lot of it is about spending time in their offices, just talking with them. Our CAMP cohort was so connected. I met all of my friends through the program. [College] is predominantly white. Because I was in the program, I was able to meet a lot of people who were Hispanic. I’m no longer in the program because it is for first-year students, but I’m still always there. I plan on working for them in my third year as a mentor.”

College student

Conversations with college staff members and students from rural communities demonstrate common challenges while acknowledging the complexity and intersectionality of rural identity. To support rural student success, colleges should strive to leverage existing resources, programs, and advising to better support rural students.

Next Steps to Support Rural Student Decision-Making

Recommendations

By 2030 there are predicted to be more than 100,000 additional jobs in Oregon that require postsecondary training (HECC, 2018). Additionally, Oregon has committed to reducing attainment gaps among minority, low-income, and rural Oregonians this decade. However, as previously mentioned, the college enrollment gap between rural and nonrural high school students in Oregon has only increased in the past five years. Without immediate action to address these gaps, they will only continue to expand. Conversations with students, staff members, and families revealed five high-leverage actions that high schools, colleges, and policymakers in Oregon can take:

- Increase targeted professional development opportunities for college and high school staff members who serve rural communities and students enrolled in teacher preparation programs who are interested in working in rural communities
- Increase college pricing transparency for students and families
- Leverage existing college resources, programs, and advising to better support rural students
- Increase exposure to college at rural high schools via increased dual enrollment opportunities, college visits, and summer transition supports
- Increase family engagement at rural high schools

Increase professional development opportunities for college and high school staff members who serve rural communities.

College staff members recommended providing professional development opportunities specifically designed for preservice teachers who are interested in working in rural communities. These opportunities would be even more effective if they were standardized and implemented for aspiring teachers across the state. They could also be offered to current teachers in rural high schools, since these teachers often take on counseling roles as well. Staff would be better equipped to know how to

best engage these students, the barriers rural students face, and how best to support them. High school staff members also recommended expanding established programs like AVID and ASPIRE, which help alleviate the burden placed on high school counselors.

Increase college pricing transparency for students and families.

Research suggests that due to varying interpretations and perceptions of affordability, there is a disconnect between college counselors and low-income students when discussing financial aid (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). As such, low-income students perceive college

to be unaffordable. With student loan debt being a major concern for young decision-makers, increased information and transparency about the true cost of college could relieve financial stress on students and their families. For example, the [Net Price Calculator](#) developed by the [U.S. Department of Education' College Affordability and Transparency Center](#) is a tool families can use to begin understanding how college costs can be covered with a mix of grants, scholarships, loans, and family contribution. Additionally, colleges can provide increased support for high school staff members to use these tools and to help students and families learn to use them.

Leverage existing college resources, programs, and advising to better support rural students.

Conversations with college staff members and students revealed that while there are a lot of supports students from rural communities can access in college, very few are specifically tailored to their needs. Many of the college staff members we spoke to came from institutions that serve large rural populations, so supports for rural students may have been implied through other services. This is not likely to be the case in most colleges and universities in the state, however. To meet the needs of rural students, colleges could leverage their existing supports by intentionally tailoring them to meet rural student needs. For example, this could include supports that are specifically designed to help rural students make connections, perform well academically, and navigate various institutional structures. As discussed by college staff members and students within this study, programs like TRIO, first-generation programs, and basic needs programs do well to remain culturally, linguistically, and contextually responsive to the unique needs of their students. Ensuring the unique needs of rural students are included in those programs could help address the persistence gap while also recognizing the limited capacity of staff members.

In addition, colleges could provide professional development for staff members who serve in advising roles. A member of our advisory group discussed having a specific advising role at their

college that works with rural, male-identifying students to support their completion, help them get hands-on experience, and connect them with local jobs. If there are opportunities to expand these types of advising roles across Oregon colleges and universities, or provide professional development around supporting rural students, this may benefit rural male students in enrolling and completing college. Colleges can also use existing resources including the MDRC's COVID-19 and Rural Higher Education Rapid Innovation and Ideas for the Future to address persistent issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increase exposure to college at rural high schools via increased dual enrollment opportunities, college visits, and summer transition supports.

High school students discussed wanting more exposure to college before their senior year, which they often felt was too late. Research suggests that beginning college preparation during a student's freshman year, connecting students with college mentors, and helping students complete tasks to enroll into college has a positive impact on student enrollment and persistence (Tierney et al., 2009). However, as shown in this study, high school staff members do not always have the capacity or resources to extend much of the support they are already providing.

High school-college partnerships could help alleviate this burden. Such partnerships typically lead to more campus visits, dual credit opportunities, and transparency around certificate and degree programs and majors offered by the institution. Some advisory group members discussed community colleges doing this work with high schools nearby, but for remote high schools such partnerships can be extremely beneficial to their students. Partnerships centering dual enrollment may also find that students develop a greater sense of belonging toward college and may feel more comfortable pursuing this route. While the state's Regional Promise program has expanded dual enrollment

opportunities for low-income rural students (Riggs et al., 2020), high school–college partnerships could help to promote these opportunities and their benefits more widely to students and families.

Additionally, easing the transition into college for rural students would promote success, as it already does for low-income and first-generation students. Easing this transition includes advising, tutoring, and mentoring from faculty members and peers and summer bridge programs. Such transitional supports may foster students’ sense of belonging on campus, build relationships with peers and staff, and have increased knowledge around college culture including navigating financial aid processes and course registration.

Increase family engagement at rural high schools.

This study highlights a disconnection between schools and families. Families support their child’s goals but do not always know how to support them with the technical steps it takes to pursue, enter, and persist in college. Increasing family engagement in rural high schools could help alleviate the burden on high school staff members while also providing families with the knowledge and skills they need to support their child’s pathways, including technical college-going processes. Increased family engagement could take the form of family-school partnerships, which research has shown to be effective (Agger et al., 2018). Such partnerships can lead to developing best strategies at engaging families, particularly those from communities who have been systemically excluded or marginalized. Partnerships can also work to inform families of college-going processes and demystify such processes (e.g., filling out the FAFSA and completing college applications).

Conclusion

Rural students face multiple challenges to making informed decisions about their pathways after high school due to perceived high costs of college, lack of exposure to information about various pathways, challenges parents/caregivers face with supporting students in completing college-going processes, lack of summer transition supports, and COVID-19’s impact on student motivation. However, our findings also highlight rural community assets related to relationships and connections to people; a vast support network for students; and pride in self, community, and family.

There are also existing systems of support that can help rural students in Oregon select and pursue education or training after high school. These include requiring college and career pathways courses during a student’s senior year of high school, providing encouragement and hands-on support from high school staff members, promoting increased support from parents/caregivers and access to their social networks, and exposing students to college-going culture via dual credit programs, college visits, and college presence at the high school. Once enrolled in college, rural students faced additional barriers related to culture shock, but we found that programs that helped students make connections on campus, foster a sense of belonging, develop academic skills, and meet their basic needs supported their completion. These programs included first year seminar, bridge/transition programs, basic needs support, first generation programs, and TRIO.

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Appendix A. Methodology

Guiding questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

- 1. How are rural students making decisions about education or training beyond high school? (i.e., pursuing a 2- or 4-year degree, pursuing a trade or technical school, or entering the workforce)**
 - a. How do students make decisions around what credential/degree pathway to pursue? (i.e., bachelor's degree, transfer pathway, terminal associate degree, certificate)
 - b. What pathways are students pursuing if they are not pursuing any education or training after high school?
 - c. What education or training pathways are students pursuing if they are not attending college?
 - d. What factors influence these decisions?
- 2. What factors support 2- or 4-year college enrollment for rural students? What are barriers to 2- or 4-year college enrollment for rural students?**
 - a. What do rural students need to successfully complete a 2 or 4-year degree?
- 3. How has the pandemic affected rural students' decisions about education or training beyond high school?**

Advisory group

To ensure a rich, culturally responsive qualitative project, we put together an advisory group comprised of nine members, including four high school staff members from rural high schools in the Valley North Coast, Southern, Eastern, and Metro regions; two community college staff members working with rural students; two university staff members working with rural students; and one college student from a rural upbringing. Advisory group tasks included three, two-hour meetings focused on providing feedback on the research plan, study protocols, and outreach and recruitment efforts and help framing the study findings. All but one member attended each of the three meetings. Advisory group members were compensated for their time.

Methods

This study is focused on 10 rural high schools in Oregon: two from Southern Oregon, two from Central Oregon, one from the Metro region, three from Valley North Coast, and two from Eastern Oregon. The number of schools from each region was determined by the number of rural schools in that region. This study used the National Center for Education Statistics rural classifications and noted schools classified as “town distant,” “town remote,” “rural distant,” and “rural remote” as rural (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d). To select schools, we used a random selection process with constraints of at least 100 students enrolled and free or reduced-price lunch eligibility of 75 percent or higher (except in the Metro region where the average is 62%). We used data from the 2018–19 academic year. We also paid special attention to Hispanic/Latinx and American Indian and Alaska Native diversity. We conducted multiple rounds of outreach to high school principals and counselors from September 2022 through January 2023.

Simultaneously, we began data collection with schools that agreed to participate. High school site contacts were asked to provide two students from their high school—one college-bound senior and one senior who was not college bound. That is, one high school senior who had explicitly stated plans of pursuing college and had taken steps to

pursue college (e.g., college applications, FAFSA), and one high school senior who had explicitly stated plans of pursuing a route other than college (e.g., trade programs, workforce). Accordingly, we conducted one-on-one interviews with 19 high school students. Some students declined to participate, and we reached back out to the counselor to provide another student. With some schools, this happened multiple times. Because outreach efforts had to end in January 2023, we were never able to find a student from one of the high schools. High school students participated in 30- to 45-minute individual interviews. High school students were compensated for their participation.

High school site contacts were also asked to provide the parent/caregiver contact information for each student. Because many students were under 18, we reached out to their parents/caregivers for written consent for student participation. Only after consent was received were high school student interviews conducted. Additionally, one parent/caregiver from each school was asked to participate in a 30-minute one-on-one interview. We conducted interviews with a total of eight parents. Parents/caregivers were compensated for their participation.

High school site contacts were also asked to provide a high school staff member to participate in a focus group with staff members from other rural high schools. We spoke to a total of nine high school staff members in four, 60-minute focus groups. One of the staff members was new to their role and felt they could speak more effectively about their role as an alumnus of the high school and as a college student, so they were later recategorized as such. High school staff members were compensated for their participation.

High school site contacts were also asked to provide alumni of the school who were current college students. This proved to be a difficult task for high schools, so we also asked college staff advisory group members for students they worked with from rural upbringings. We spoke to 10 college students in three, 60-minute focus groups. College students were compensated for their participation.

All 10 high school site contacts were compensated for supporting the research team in our data collection efforts. In many instances, the high school site contact also participated in a high school staff focus group. Accordingly, these staff members were compensated twice—once for their participation in a focus group and once for supporting data collection efforts by providing student, parent/caregiver, staff, and alumni contact information. Additionally, all participating high schools received a high school site memo detailing data from their school around demographics, graduation, and college enrollment, as well as truncated study findings.

College staff members were identified via a snowball sampling method. During interviews with college students, we asked if there were any staff members at their institution that have supported them in any way (e.g., academically, transition supports, financial supports). We reached out to college staff members provided by the college students. We spoke to a total of seven college staff members in two, 60-minute focus groups. College staff member roles ranged from faculty to student affairs positions. College staff members were compensated for their participation.

All study protocols can be made available upon request.

IRB Process

This study went through a full review by the Education Northwest Institutional Review Board. This process included multiple rounds of revisions to protocols and consent forms to ensure any potential bias or coercion was eliminated. This process also ensured study participants were properly compensated.

Limitations

The participant sample for this project is not representative of all rural students and families across Oregon. Accordingly, we cannot generalize these findings for all rural students in Oregon. Representation was not the goal of this study. Instead, we sought to complement our [previous study](#) with qualitative data that may begin to explain how students are making decisions, while also highlighting the support and assets many of these students already have and use in their decision-making processes.

Another limitation of this work, and an opportunity for future work, is the lack of perspectives and voices from rural high school alumni who are currently in a non-college pathway. Understanding the experiences of students in the workforce and/or trade programs would help us further understand supports they may need while transitioning. Additionally, research shows that rural male students have lower enrollment, persistence, and completion rates than rural female students in Oregon. This study did not account for sex or gender. While discussion of how sex or gender impacts student decisions did come up in conversations with participants and advisory group meetings, questions around this were not explicitly asked in interview protocols. Accordingly, future work can do more to account for these identities.



