Rural Matters: Quantifying the Barriers Facing Students in Rural California

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The RP Group
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TheRPGroup

Agenda

01 **CA Transfer Landscape & Previous Research**

02 **A Focus on Rural Learners**
Findings from our quantitative research

03 **Recommendations**
Proposed recommendations for colleges, universities, & policymakers

01

CA Transfer Landscape



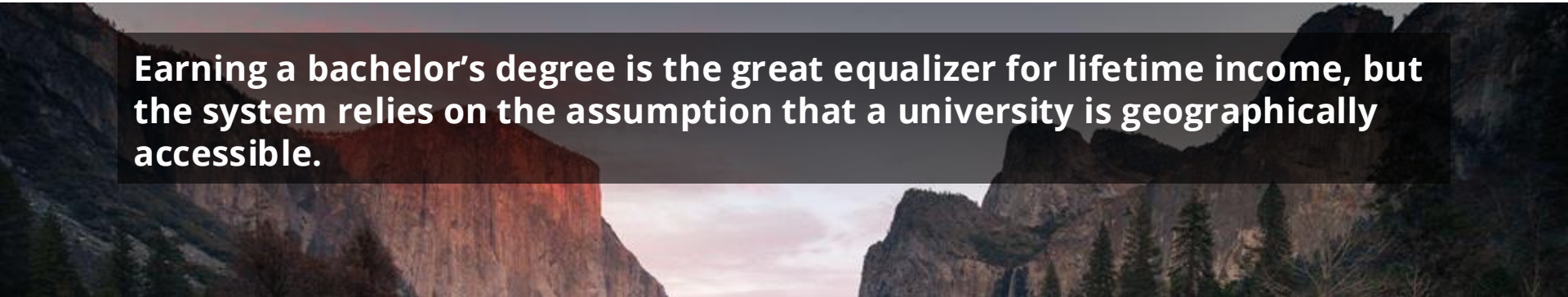
Research Problem

A university degree offers a key lever for increasing income inequality

- Lifetime earnings are significantly higher
- More availability for jobs

Degree attainment is not equal across all groups or regions

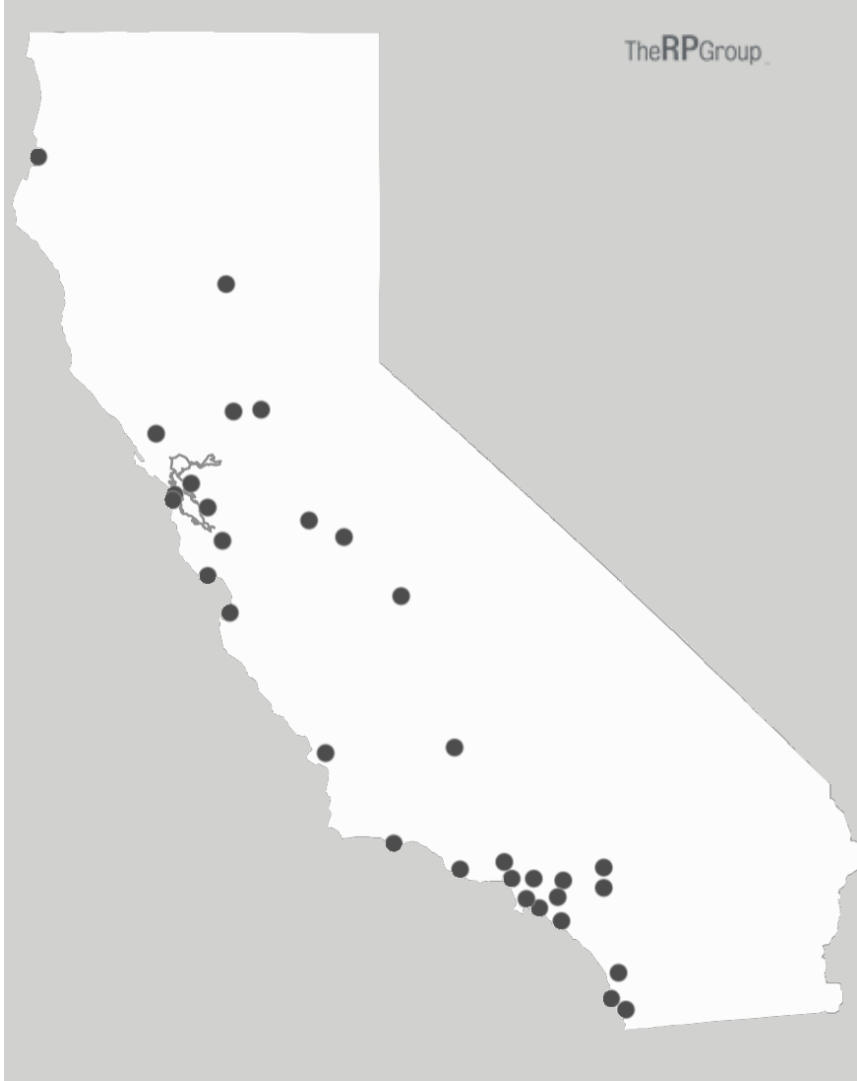
- Regional differences among transfer rates exist
- Positive association between the number of college options and the likelihood of enrollment



Earning a bachelor's degree is the great equalizer for lifetime income, but the system relies on the assumption that a university is geographically accessible.

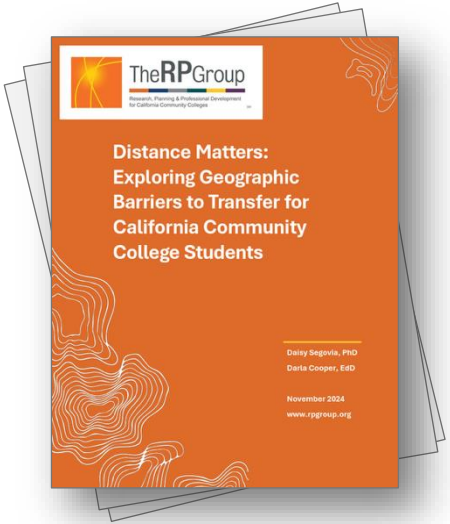
California's Education System

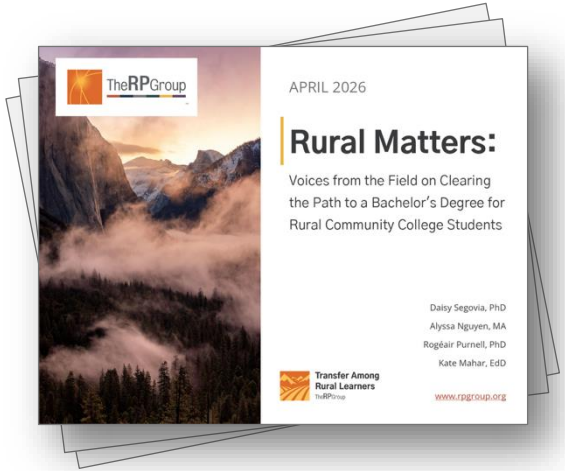
- **32 CA Public Universities**
  - 23 California State University campuses
  - 9 University of California campuses
- **116 CA Community Colleges**
  - 115 Community Colleges with physical locations
  - 1 Community College fully online



Distance Matters

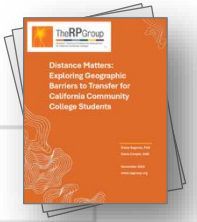
Once community college students are ready to transfer to a university, the **location may affect their options.**







College Transfer Rates by Distance

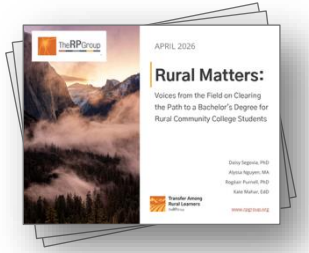


Source: *Distance matters: Exploring geographic barriers to transfer for California community college students.*

Distance Equals...

Several factors affect the ability of rural institutions and their students to transfer to a four-year university.

- **Distance = Connections**
  - Social capital is critical for both students and institutions
- **Distance = Money**
  - Relocation costs, severed family ties, lost employment, etc.
  - Rural colleges spend more per student to deliver comparable services



> *"**Distance is the key**. Everything is harder because of distance."*



Source: *Rural Matters: Voices from the Field on Clearing the Path to a Bachelor's Degree for Rural Community College Students*

02

A Quantitative Focus on Rural Learners





The Current Study

Survey

- Administered in Fall 2025 to distinguish rural-specific transfer factors
- Currently enrolled students intending to transfer
- *N* = 4,745

Two Comparison Groups

- Rural colleges
- Non-rural colleges – geographically stratified approach to ensure regional representation

Survey Sample Composition

- **Rural Sample**
  - Designated as rural
  - University Desert & Non-University Desert
- **Non-Rural Sample**
  - Not designated as rural
  - Non-University Desert only

Metric	Rural Sample	Non-Rural, Non-UD Sample	Total
Number of Colleges (*n* = 10+)	13	9	22
Number of Respondents	2,592	2,153	4,745
Percent (%) of Sample	55%	45%	100%

Who Rural Students Are

Racial/Ethnic Differences

- Majority Hispanic/Latine
  - 52% vs. 38%
- More White and fewer Asian students
  - 36% vs. 23% White
  - 1% vs. 16% Asian

Rural Students with Dependents

- More likely to care for dependents

40% RURAL vs. 30% NON-RURAL

- Among parents, more likely to be a single parent

43% RURAL vs. 29% NON-RURAL

Why Students Rule Out Transfer

The Navigation Desert

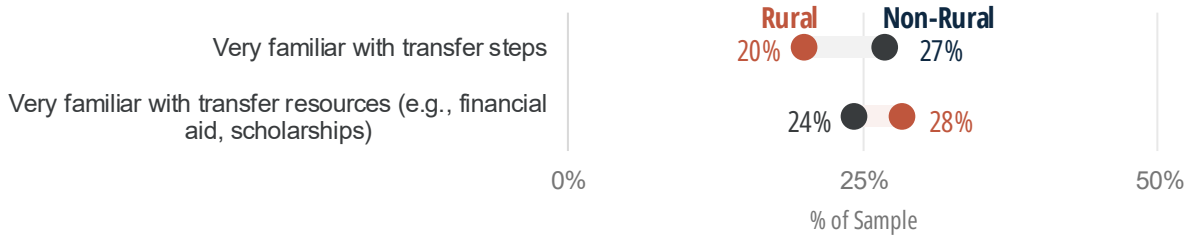
- The data reveal a **navigation gap**: a critical lack of awareness of which transfer resources exist, where to find them, and how to use them effectively.



Information Gap

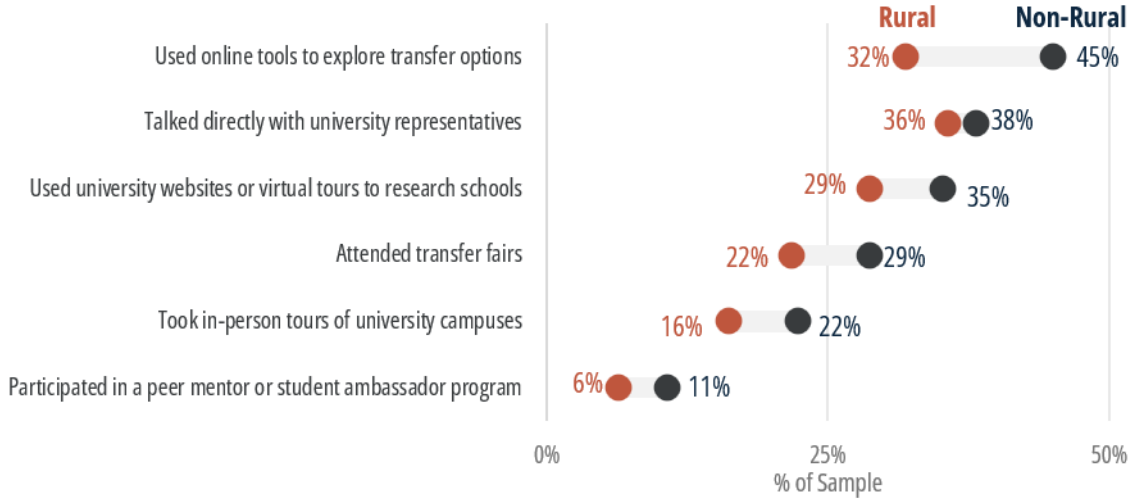
- Rural students are significantly **less familiar with the procedural steps of transfer** (20% vs. 27% among non-rural students)
  - But more familiar with transfer **resources**





Underutilized Tools

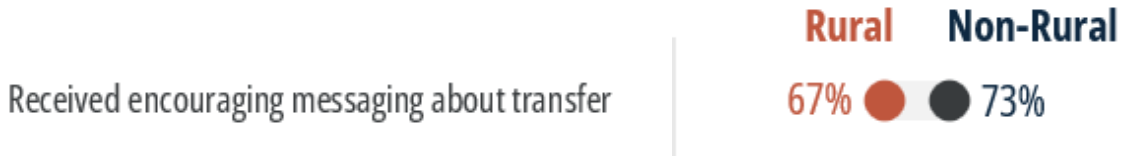
- Despite being technologically fluent, rural students are less likely to:
  - Have used online research tools
  - Attended transfer fairs
  - Taken campus tours



33% of rural students reported participating in **ZERO transfer-focused activities**, compared to 20% of non-rural students.

Lack of Encouraging Messaging

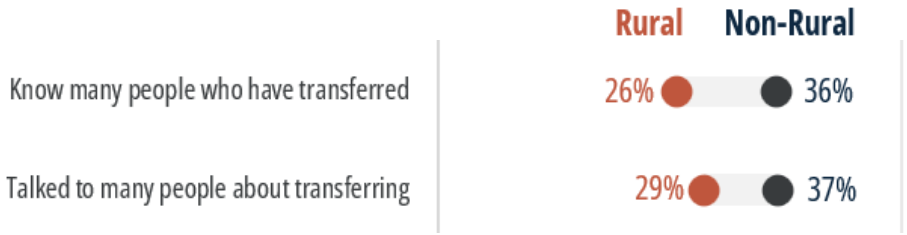
- Rural students report receiving fewer encouraging messages (67%) about transfer from their environment compared to urban peers (73%)





Role Model Scarcity

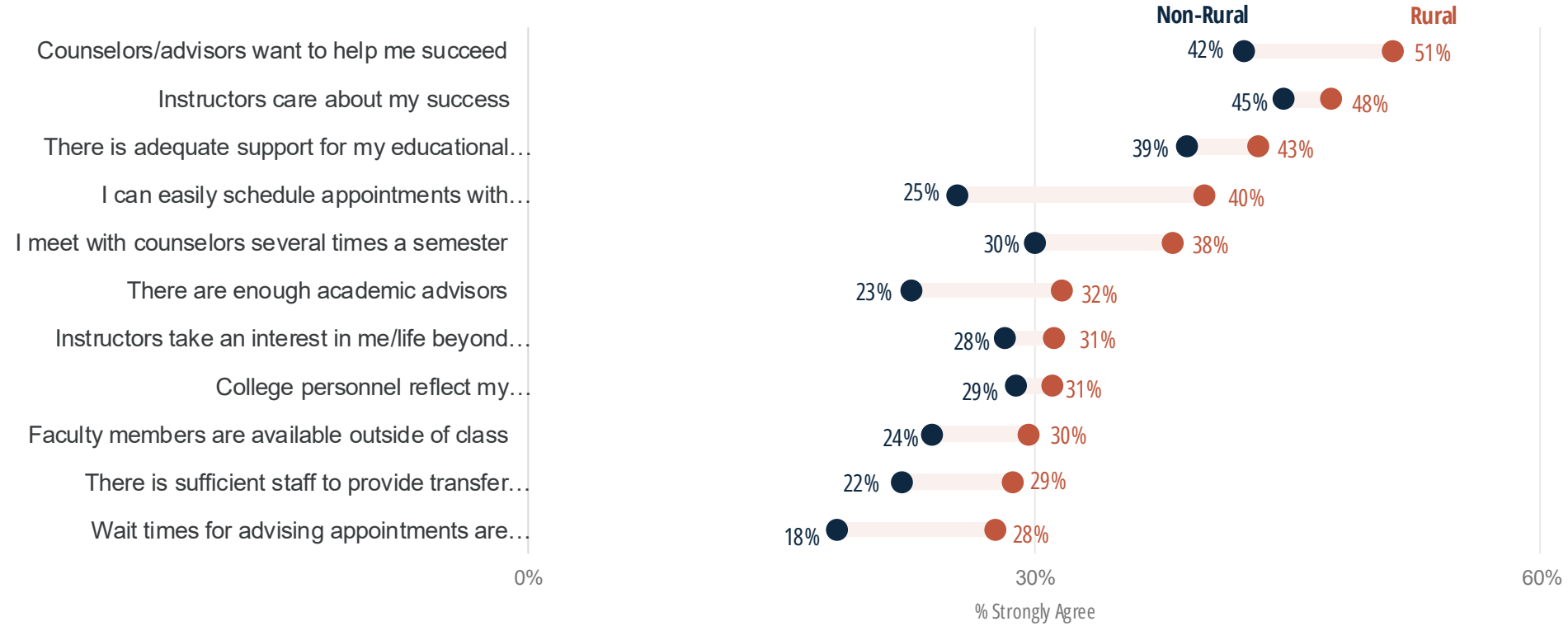
- Rural learners are substantially less likely to know others who have successfully transferred





What Facilitates Transfer

Support & Access



High Institutional Trust

- **Stronger Relationships:**

  Rural students report meaningfully stronger relationships with college staff than urban students.

- **Advisor Trust:**

  Over half of rural students strongly agree that their counselors want them to succeed, and they find it easier to schedule appointments.

This deep trust is the highest-leverage delivery mechanism for closing the navigation gap.



Demand for Place-Based Solutions

- **BDP Openness:**

  72% of rural students would consider a community college Bachelor's Degree Program (BDP), compared to 60% of non-rural students.

- **Online Flexibility:**

  There is a high demand for fully online university pathways that allow students to remain in their communities while earning a degree.



Intact Ambition and Confidence

- **The Ambition Myth:** Research proves geography suppresses *transfer rates*, but **not student ambition**.
- **Academic Readiness:** Rural students show **no lower confidence** in their ability to handle university-level coursework than their non-rural peers.

The gap is structural, not a lack of student desire or capability.



03

Statewide Recommendations



Recommendations to Community Colleges

- Close the Navigation Gap
- Build & Formalize Peer Transfer Networks
- Shift Messaging toward Empowerment
- Expand BDPs that Align with Rural Pathways
- Design for Students with Dependents



Close the Navigation Gap

Empower and support counselors to serve as active architects of transfer pathways, delivering step-by-step guidance proactively rather than waiting for students to ask.

- Provide step-by-step guides and checklists
- Host regular on-campus visits from university admissions reps
- Guide students through online university research together during advising appointments

Build & Formalize Peer Transfer Networks

Develop formal mentorship programs, transfer cohorts, and peer recognition practices that **make transfer visible and normal on rural campuses.**

- Develop formal mentorship programs that connect current rural students with alumni who successfully transferred
- Visibly celebrate transfer success

Shift Messaging toward Empowerment

Train instructors, counselors, and staff to **speak positively and knowledgeably about transfer**, and actively challenge deficit narratives about who transfer is for.

- Transfer must be framed as aligned with students' existing career goals, not as leaving the community behind.

Expand BDPs that Align with Rural Pathways

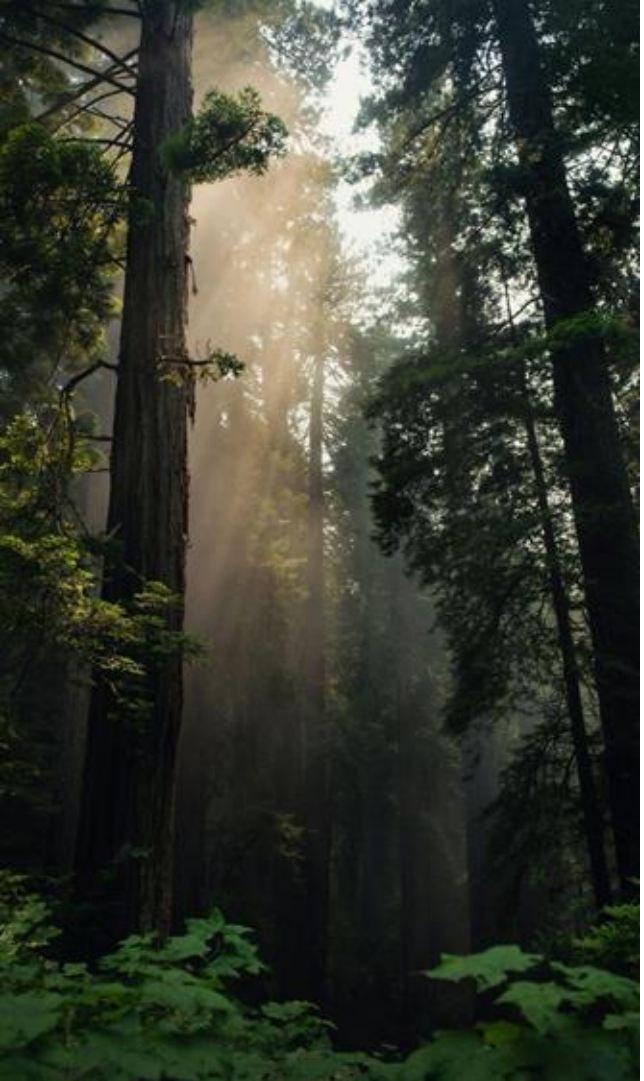
Conduct community needs assessments and prioritize BDPs in fields compatible with online and hybrid delivery and local employment opportunities.

- Conduct community needs assessments to identify which bachelor's degree programs would serve local labor markets
- Proactively communicate existing programs

Design for Students with Dependents

Center caregiving realities in transfer advising, financial planning, and program design.

- Counselors must proactively include childcare options at destination universities in transfer conversations
- Financial planning resources need to explicitly model dependent care costs alongside tuition and housing
- Colleges need to advocate directly with destination universities for family-friendly housing options



Recommendation for University Partners

- **Expand & Incentivize University Partnerships targeting rural and University Desert students**

  Develop dedicated rural recruitment portfolios, virtual outreach through existing learning management systems, and guaranteed transfer agreements from specific rural colleges to specific university programs.

Recommendations for Policymakers & System Leaders

- Address the Rural Penalty in funding formulas
- Reform and expand exemptions under the 50% Law
- Expand and target place-based baccalaureate options



Address the Rural Penalty

Adjust the Student-Centered Funding Formula (SCFF) and other funding mechanisms to **recognize geographic isolation as a cost driver** and provide incentive funding for rural colleges that expand BDPs and university partnerships.

- Include specific adjustments for rural college transfer costs
- Categorical programs must be protected
- Consider granting regional dispensations from program authorization requirements

Reform the 50% Law

Broaden the definition of instructional costs to include student support services that directly enable students' educational progression, with **expanded exemptions for rural and small colleges**.

- Broaden the definition of instructional costs to include student support services that directly enable educational progression

Expand Place-Based BA Options

Authorize additional community college BDPs at rural colleges, prioritize fields aligned with regional labor markets, and fund university–community college partnerships that deliver online or hybrid degree-completion programs on rural community college campuses.

- Expand authorization for community college baccalaureate degree programs
- Fund university partnerships that deliver online or hybrid degree-completion programs
- Track & report program completion rates and labor market outcomes for rural students

Conclusion

Rural students are ambitious, capable, and ready to transfer when the system makes it possible

The geographic barriers documented here are not immovable.



Questions?



Thank you!

Questions?

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QR to Report

Transfer Among Rural Learners

www.rpgroup.org/projects/ruraltransfer