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Rural Matters:

Quantifying the Barriers Facing Students in Rural California

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Transfer Among Rural Learners
TheRPGroup

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Executive Summary

California's 116 community colleges serve as the primary gateway to higher education for millions of students, including those in rural communities where geography shapes every dimension of the transfer journey. This report presents findings from a statewide survey of 4,745 current and recent community college students, designed to quantify the barriers that impede rural students' transfer and to identify specific interventions to overcome them.

The central finding is both striking and actionable: rural students are not unambitious. They have more invested and more accessible counselors, are more open to new degree pathways, and show no less academic self-confidence than their non-rural peers. What suppresses transfer is a set of structural, informational, and social barriers that the system has not yet been designed to overcome. The report presents the following key findings:

- **KEY FINDING 1 - Geography Suppresses Transfer Planning**

  Rural students are less likely to plan to transfer than their non-rural peers. Within the rural group, this gap is driven largely by those in University Deserts[1] rather than rural students outside them, suggesting that distance to a university may be a key factor suppressing transfer planning.

- **KEY FINDING 2 - A Navigation Desert Compounds the Geographic One**

  Rural students lack not only physical access to universities but also access to the guidance, information, and resources needed to navigate the transfer process—a Navigation Desert. Rural students are less familiar with transfer steps and are less likely to have attended transfer fairs or used online tools to explore transfer options, even though they take more classes online than non-rural students. The common thread across all these gaps is the absence of proactive guidance to the resources and activities that move students toward transfer.

- **KEY FINDING 3 - Rural Colleges Are Invested in and Accessible to Students, But That Asset Is Not Being Sufficiently Utilized**
  Rural students are more likely than non-rural students to strongly agree that their counselors genuinely want them to succeed, that they can schedule advising appointments easily, that faculty are available outside class, and that their college has sufficient staff to provide transfer support. The institutional relationships are

[1] Areas where the closest California public university is at least 25 miles away (Segovia & Cooper, 2024).

there. The institutional capacity to act on those relationships in service of supporting transfer students is not.

- **KEY FINDING 4 - Students Lack Role Models and Encouragement, Yet Academic Confidence Remains High**

  Rural students show no lower confidence in their ability to handle university-level academic work than their non-rural peers. However, rural students are less likely to describe the messages they receive from their community college about transfer as encouraging than students in non-rural regions. Compared to their non-rural peers, they are less likely to know many individuals who have successfully transferred or to have discussed the process with many people. These gaps between rural and non-rural students are environmental—produced by thin peer networks and insufficient institutional messaging, not by any deficit in students' own belief in their abilities or their interest in or readiness to transfer.

- **KEY FINDING 5 - Students Are Ready for New Solutions**

  Nearly three-quarters (72%) of rural students would consider a community college Baccalaureate Degree Program (BDP), compared to 60% among students in non-rural regions. Rural students are also far more open to fully online university pathways than their non-rural peers. Demand for place-based and flexible solutions is high and waiting to be met.

Summary of Recommendations

- For colleges and districts, the highest-leverage actions are closing the navigation gap through proactive counseling, building peer transfer networks, shifting institutional messaging, and expanding BDPs.
- For university partners, the priority is intentional outreach to rural and University Desert students through dedicated recruitment, CVC-OEI,[2] and pipeline agreements.
- For policymakers, the priorities are addressing the rural penalty in funding formulas (the higher per-student cost of delivering transfer support in geographically isolated regions), reforming the 50% Law, protecting categorical programs, and expanding place-based baccalaureate options.

[2] California Virtual Campus/Online Education Initiative



Introduction

The Transfer Imperative

Transfer from California's community colleges to traditional four-year institutions (hereinafter referred to as universities) is one of the most powerful drivers of economic mobility for students who begin their postsecondary journeys at the state's 116 community colleges. For rural, low-income, and other historically underserved student groups, for whom community college is often the primary point of entry into higher education, transfer represents the main route to a bachelor's degree and the career and earnings opportunities that come with it. Yet, transfer rates remain persistently lower in rural regions, and especially in areas where universities are geographically out of reach (Segovia & Cooper, 2024).

This report is the third phase of a multi-year research effort focused on those geographic barriers. The *Distance Matters* mapping study established the scope of the problem (Segovia & Cooper, 2024). The *Rural Matters* qualitative phase documented how practitioners and students experience these barriers at 15 colleges across the state (Segovia et al., 2026). This statewide survey now quantifies those patterns at scale, providing the empirical foundation for targeted policy and practice change.

The Geography Problem: University Deserts

Originally coined by Hillman and Weichman (2016), the term "education desert" was defined as a region where no colleges or universities were located nearby (typically within 25 miles),

or where one community college was the only public, broad-access institution nearby. This definition was later expanded to an area where there is at most one public, broad-access college nearby (Hillman, 2019).

For the purposes of this research, we refer specifically to "University Deserts" as areas wherein there are no public California universities within at least 25 miles of a given community college (Segovia & Cooper, 2024). By this definition, 29 California community colleges (CCCs) are classified as University Desert colleges, the majority of which (*n* = 17) are located in rural regions[3] of the state. An additional four colleges are classified as rural but not located in a University Desert.

Students in University Deserts face a compounding disadvantage: They attend community colleges, yet the next step in their educational journey is, by definition, physically remote. This distance does not simply mean a longer commute; it means relocation costs, severed family ties, lost employment, and a journey that most of their peers and community members have never made. Distance is a structural barrier that forecloses a pathway before students can fully evaluate it. Practitioners from our previous report, *Rural Matters: Voices from the Field on Clearing the Path to a Bachelor's Degree for Rural Community College Students*, described this dynamic in their own words:

> *"Distance is the key.* ***Everything is harder because of distance.*** *[Students] haven't seen the college, they don't know what to expect, they have to leave home, they have to get an apartment. All that is distance."*
> *-RURAL COLLEGE PRACTITIONER*

> *"This is why the…availability of* ***online programs are more and more popular, because you don't have to travel as far****…away from family who can stay living where you're living. Don't have to worry about housing."*
> *- DIRECTOR OF DISABLED STUDENT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES (DSPS)*

[3] Colleges are classified by IPEDS as "rural" if they are in locations that have been identified as rural or town and/or have a rural-serving institution (RSI) score > 1.175. In the sample of 29 California community colleges, 17 met the criteria for rural classification. The remaining 12 colleges located in University Deserts were classified as non-rural.

What the Survey Was Designed to Answer

Prior qualitative work (Segovia et al., 2026) established that barriers to transfer exist; this survey was designed to establish how common they are and what distinguishes rural students from their non-rural peers across the system. Four research questions guided the analysis:

- What specific factors drive the transfer decisions of rural learners?
- What facilitates transfer and helps rural learners overcome identified barriers?
- What resources can rural colleges and communities offer to support transfer?
- How do relevant factors differ by geographic context, and where does University Desert status compound rural barriers?

In This Report

This report is organized into four sections. The first presents findings on who rural community college students are and how they differ from their non-rural peers in terms of demographics. The second examines what suppresses students' consideration of transfer, including geographic, navigational, and social barriers. The third looks at what facilitates transfer, including institutional relationships and openness to new degree pathways. The fourth presents what students say they need, followed by recommendations organized by audience.

Throughout the report, callout boxes draw on findings from the qualitative phase (Segovia et al., 2026) to connect the survey data to the voices of students and practitioners. Where the quantitative data point to a pattern, these boxes offer firsthand accounts of what that pattern looks and feels like on the ground.



Methodology

Survey Design and Administration

The survey was administered in fall 2025. Colleges were invited to send the survey to all current students, enabling the capture of both currently enrolled students and those who had recently transferred. All colleges in rural regions and University Deserts (*n* = 33) were invited to participate. Additionally, a sample of 23 non-rural, non-University Desert colleges was invited to serve as a comparison group, designed to ensure geographic coverage across the state. Comparison colleges were selected using a geographically stratified approach to ensure representation from multiple regions across California and to identify institutions with demographic and regional contexts broadly similar to those of the focal colleges. The comparison sample, therefore, reflects a balance of urban, suburban, and regional-serving institutions distributed across the state. Ultimately, 17 of the 33 (52%) rural and/or University Desert colleges and six of the 23 (26%) comparison colleges opted to participate. An additional three comparison colleges had ten or more responses (likely due to students receiving the survey invitation from an invited college but listing another as their primary institution). A full list of participating colleges can be found in the Appendix.

Survey Sample Composition

After removing duplicates and non-responses, the final clean sample comprised 4,745 cases. For the purposes of this report, analyses compare rural students (combining those at rural University Desert colleges and rural non-University Desert colleges) to non-rural,

non-University Desert students, who serve as the primary comparison group.[4] The non-rural University Desert group is excluded from the main comparisons because its geographic profile is somewhat ambiguous. That is, they exhibit characteristics often associated with rural contexts, including lower population density, geographic isolation, and reduced proximity to baccalaureate-granting institutions, but fall outside the formal rural classification. The two-group comparison (outlined in Table 1) provides a lens on what rurality itself, as a lived context, means for transfer.

TABLE 1

The survey sample consisted of two groups: rural colleges and non-rural/non-UD colleges

Survey Sample Metrics

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%

Note: UD = University Desert

Among the 4,745 respondents in this analysis, the vast majority were currently enrolled at a California community college. Only a small proportion were currently enrolled at a university, and these were concentrated in the non-rural group (*n* = 155 in non-rural, *n* = 73 in rural). As such, the analyses in this report center on currently enrolled community college students, for whom transfer barriers remain most directly relevant.

Analytical Approach

Primary comparisons used chi-square tests, ANOVAs, and descriptive frequencies to assess differences between rural and non-rural students. The original survey was designed with a four-group structure separating rurality from University Desert status; that background design context is preserved in the methodology for transparency, but the primary analyses in this report collapse the two rural groups and compare them to the non-rural, non-

[4] Throughout the report, "non-rural" is used as a shorthand for the non-rural, non-University Desert group.

University Desert comparison group. This decision reflects both a conceptual and empirical reality: The research question centers on rurality as a lived context, and many rural colleges that fall just outside the University Desert threshold are, in practice, nearly as geographically isolated as those within it. Collapsing the two rural groups allows the analysis to capture the rural experience broadly, while still noting where University Desert status adds explanatory power. Where University Desert status is particularly relevant as an explanatory factor within the rural group, it is noted in the text. Given the large sample size (*N* = 4,745), most group differences are statistically significant. Throughout this report, we focus on differences of at least five percentage points, which we treat as the threshold for practical significance—that is, differences large enough to be meaningful for policy and practice, not just statistically detectable.

Limitations

As a cross-sectional survey—one that captures responses at a single point in time rather than tracking students over time—the data cannot establish causality. Participation rates varied by college, and colleges that opted into the survey may differ in meaningful ways from those that did not.



Key Findings

This section presents findings across four domains:

1. Who the rural community college students are, and how they differ demographically from their non-rural peers;
2. What suppresses transfer consideration, including geographic, navigational, and social barriers;
3. What facilitates transfer, including institutional relationships and program openness; and
4. What students say they need to successfully transfer.

Who Rural Students Are and Why Their Context Matters

Understanding who attends rural community colleges is essential context for everything that follows. Rural students are not a monolithic group, but several patterns emerge consistently from the data that shape the barriers they face and the interventions most likely to reach them.

Based on the data collected in our recent survey, rural and non-rural students within our sample exhibited significant differences. Among our survey respondents, Hispanic/Latine students make up the majority of students at rural colleges (52%), compared to 38% at non-rural colleges. Students in the rural sample were also more likely to identify as White (36% vs. 23%) and American Indian (5% vs. 2%). Conversely, Asian student populations in our sample were heavily concentrated in non-rural institutions. This concentration includes East Asian respondents, with 16% non-rural and 1% rural; Southeast Asian respondents at 11% non-rural versus 2% rural; and South Asian respondents at 5% non-rural versus 1% rural. These demographic trends align with previous findings comparing rural and non-rural regions (Segovia & Cooper, 2024).

Our survey findings also highlight differing family dynamics between the two groups. Only 15% of rural respondents reported having college-educated parents, compared with 29% of non-rural respondents, indicating a higher concentration of first-generation college students in our rural sample (see Figure 1). Rural students were also more likely to have dependents (see callout box at right).

Rural Students With Dependents

Rural students were significantly more likely to report caring for children, older relatives, or other dependents

40% **RURAL** vs. 30% NON-RURAL

And, among those with dependents, **rural students were significantly more likely to be single parents**

43% **RURAL** vs. 29% NON-RURAL

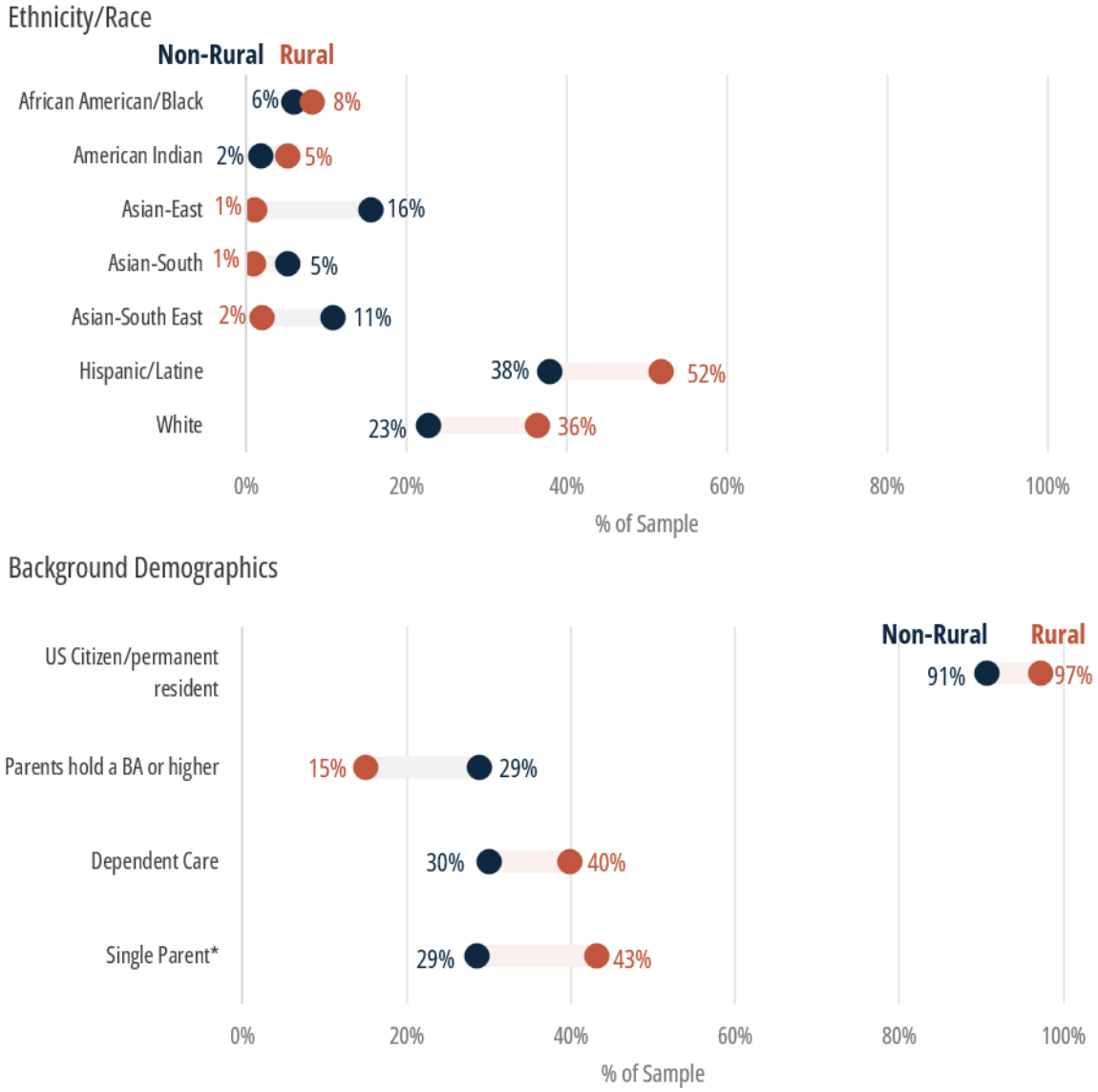
The implications of caregiving responsibilities extend beyond demographics. Rural students with dependents are more likely than their rural peers without dependents to:

- Be taking **classes entirely online** (44% vs. 22%);
- Plan to **remain in their area** long-term (50% vs. 32%); and
- Say that **proximity to home is very important** in their educational decisions (55% vs. 30%).

FIGURE 1

Rural and non-rural survey respondents differed significantly across race, ethnicity, and family background

Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents, Rural vs. Non-Rural Students



Note: *See call-out box on the previous page for more information about single parents.

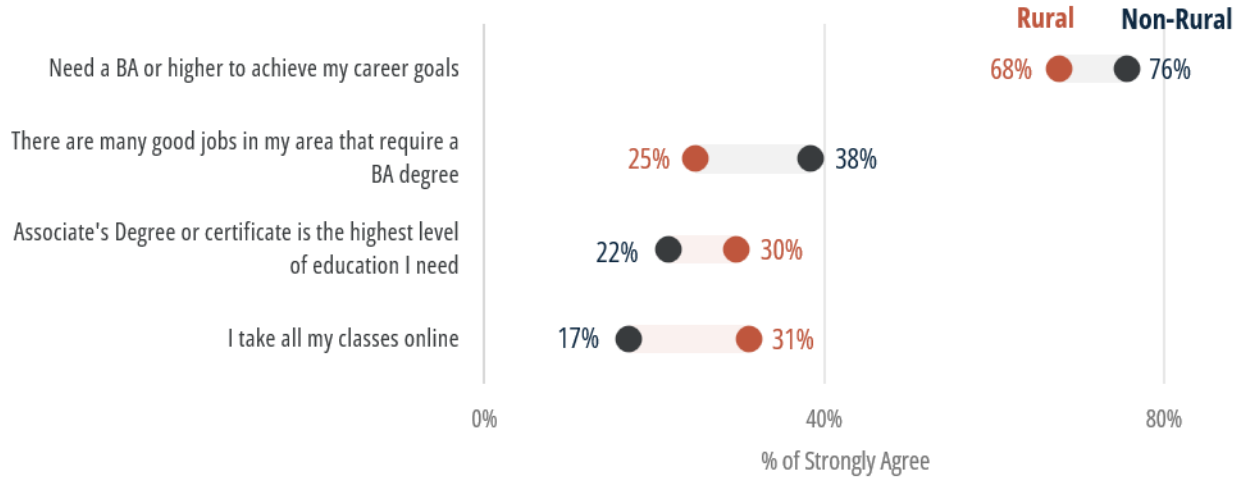
Beyond demographics and family obligations, rural and non-rural respondents in our sample differed in their long-term academic and economic outlooks (see Figure 2). Rural respondents were less likely to state that they need a bachelor's degree or higher to achieve their professional goals (68% compared to 76% of their non-rural peers). Instead, they were more likely to report needing a certificate or an associate degree to reach their career goals (30% vs. 22% among non-rural respondents). These educational goals align closely with students' views of their local economies. Specifically, rural respondents were substantially less likely to believe there are ample good job opportunities in their local area that require a bachelor's degree, with only 25% agreeing compared to 38% of non-rural respondents.

These background, family, and economic factors closely align with how respondents in our study choose to attend classes. Likely balancing caregiving obligations, career outlooks, and geographic distance, rural respondents in our sample were significantly more likely to take their community college courses entirely online, with 31% opting for a fully virtual path compared to 17% of non-rural respondents.

FIGURE 2

Rural and non-rural students differ in their long-term academic and economic outlooks

Perceived Degree Requirements and Local Job Opportunities, Rural vs. Non-Rural Respondents



Understanding Why Students Rule Out Transfer

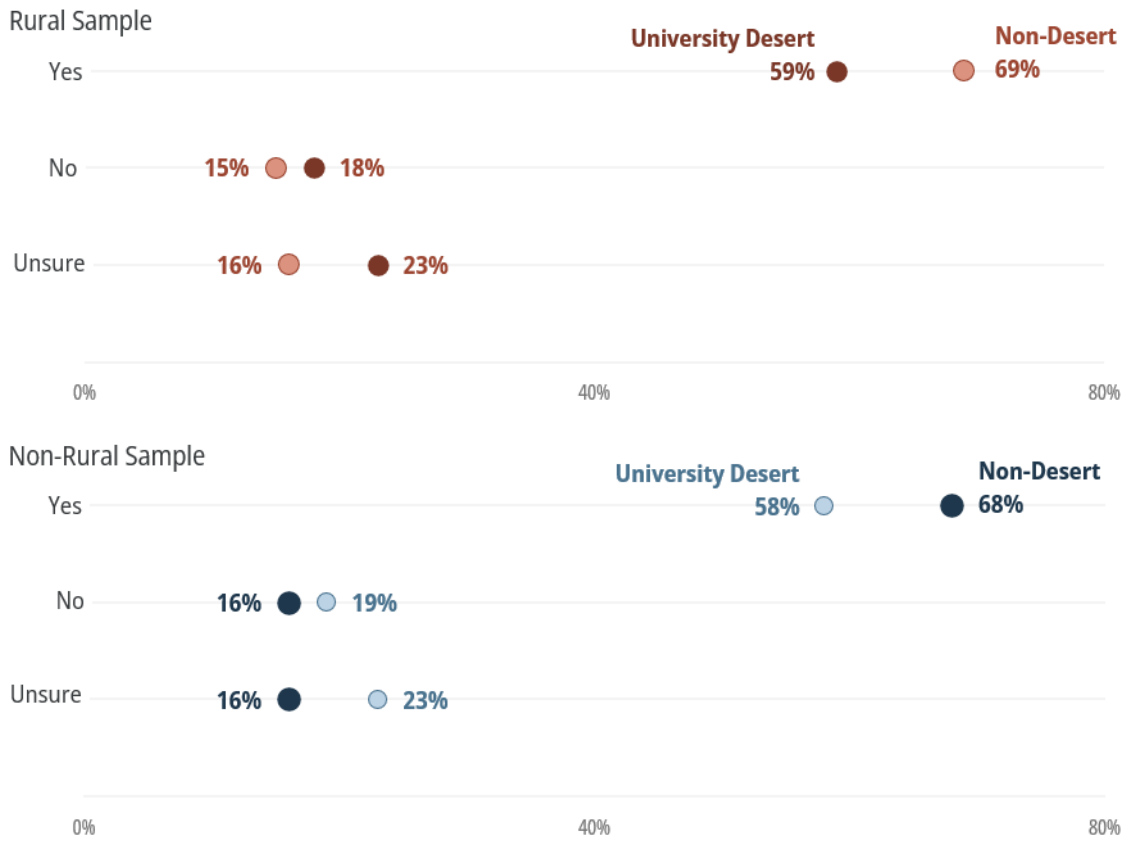
Geography Shapes Transfer Paths but Not Students' Ambition

Rural students are less likely than their non-rural peers to be planning to transfer (61% vs. 68%). This gap is real, but its source matters. As shown in Figure 3, the gap is driven primarily by students in rural University Deserts (59%) rather than by rural students who are not in a University Desert (69%), who transfer at rates comparable to non-rural students. The fact that rural students outside University Deserts consider transfer at rates equal to or higher than those of non-rural students suggests that rurality alone does not suppress transfer planning; rather, proximity to a university does. The implication is important: When geographic access is addressed, rural students are just as likely as non-rural students to pursue transfer.

FIGURE 3

Students located in University Deserts are less likely to consider transfer, regardless of rurality

Percent of Respondents Indicating They Would Consider Transfer, by Geography



A Navigation Desert Compounds the Geographic One

Just as a University Desert describes a region without accessible four-year institutions, we propose the term "Navigation Desert" to describe a condition in which students lack sufficient access to the guidance, tools, and information needed to move through the transfer process. Figure 4 on the next page shows that compared to their non-rural counterparts, rural students are:

- Less familiar with the procedural steps of transfer (20% reporting high familiarity vs. 27% among non-rural students);
- Less likely to have attended transfer fairs (22% vs. 29%);
- Less likely to have taken university campus tours (16% vs. 22%);
- Less likely to have visited university websites (29% vs. 35%); and
- Less likely to be using online tools to explore transfer options (32% vs. 45%).

This navigation gap is not driven by a lack of access to technology: Rural students in our sample actually took more of their classes online than non-rural students did (31% vs. 17%). Instead, 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.

Notably, the navigation gap does not appear across every type of support. Compared to non-rural students, rural students were:

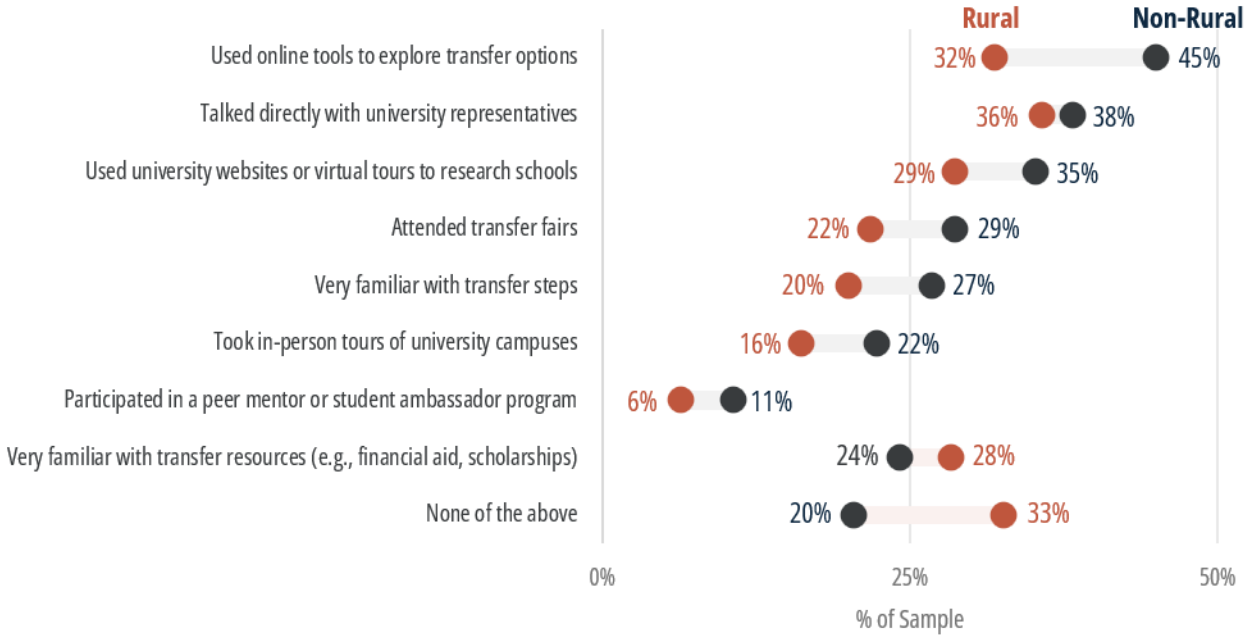
- About equally likely to have spoken directly with university representatives (36% among rural students vs. 38% among non-rural students) and
- Slightly more familiar with financial aid, scholarships, and other transfer resources (28% among rural students vs. 24% among non-rural students), the only area in our data where rural students outpaced their non-rural counterparts.

The navigation gap is concentrated instead in students' hands-on engagement with the transfer process itself, knowing the steps involved and actively seeking out resources, both captured in Figure 4 below. The cumulative effect is stark: one-third of rural students (33%) reported not participating in any transfer-focused activity at all, compared with one-fifth of non-rural students (20%).

FIGURE 4

Rural students lack the awareness, guidance, and support needed to navigate the transfer process

Knowledge of and Participation in Transfer-Focused Activities, Rural vs. Non-Rural Respondents



Lack of Encouraging Messaging and Thin Peer Networks Compounds the Rural Transfer Gap

Survey data highlight significant differences in how rural and non-rural respondents engage with their social and academic networks regarding transfer. Rural students were less likely than non-rural students to report speaking to many people about the possibility of transferring (29% vs. 37%, respectively—see Figure 5). While both groups were most likely to have spoken with an academic advisor or counselor and with family members, rural students were less likely to have talked to friends or classmates about transferring (61% vs. 73% among non-rural students). When rural students did speak with someone, they were also less likely than non-rural students to have spoken with current or former university students/people who have made the transfer journey (18% vs. 27%, respectively).

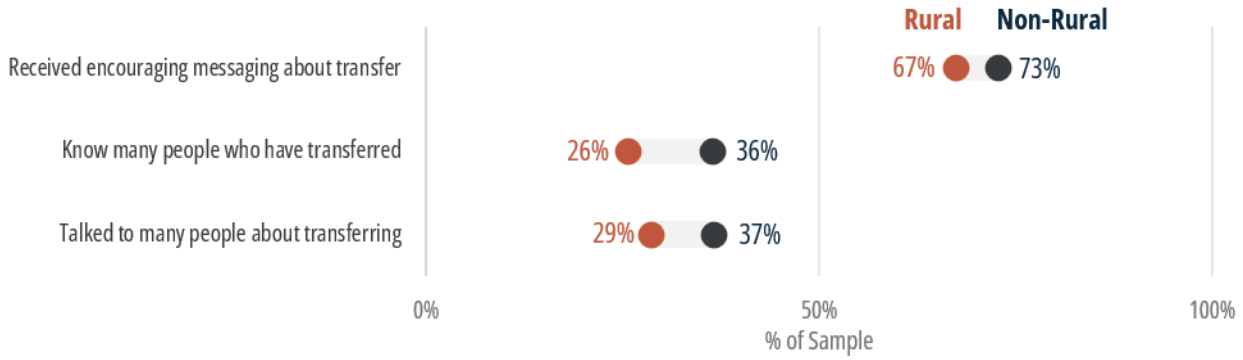
Further, regardless of whom they spoke to, the messaging about transfer was uneven. Rural students were less likely than non-rural students to report that the messages they received about transfer were mostly encouraging—that the people they spoke with thought transfer was a good idea for them (67% vs. 73%). The remainder reported receiving

messages that were mixed, purely informational, discouraging, or unclear—a pattern suggesting that for roughly one in three rural students, the guidance they received either withheld a clear positive signal or actively complicated their path. Rural students were also less likely to know many people who have transferred (26%) than non-rural students (36%). When no one in a student's immediate world has made the transfer journey, it may be more difficult for them to see the path as real and navigable.

FIGURE 5

Rural students are less likely than their non-rural peers to have a social network that is familiar with the transfer journey

Transfer Messaging, Social Networks, and Familiarity, Rural vs. Non-Rural Respondents



What makes the transfer messaging and social network gap shown in Figure 5 particularly important is its pairing with a counter-narrative finding: Rural students show no lower confidence in their ability to handle the university-level work than their non-rural peers. Only 8% of rural students expressed a complete lack of confidence in their academic capabilities, compared with 7% of non-rural students. Their academic self-confidence is intact. Taken together, these findings reveal an environmental lack of encouragement, stemming from less encouraging external messaging about transfer (67% of rural students received encouraging messaging, compared with 73% of non-rural students) and a scarcity of visible transfer role models, rather than a reflection of their own perceived abilities.

What Facilitates Transfer: Rural Assets and Structural Gaps

This section examines what the data show about facilitators of transfer among rural students. It is organized around three themes. The first looks at institutional relationships—where rural students show a genuine and measurable asset in how invested and accessible their college counselors are, alongside an important caveat about the limits of that access. The second examines rural students' awareness of and openness to community college Baccalaureate Degree Programs, where rural student demand is high, but program supply has not kept pace. The third looks at what students across all groups say they need most and where rural students diverge from their non-rural peers.

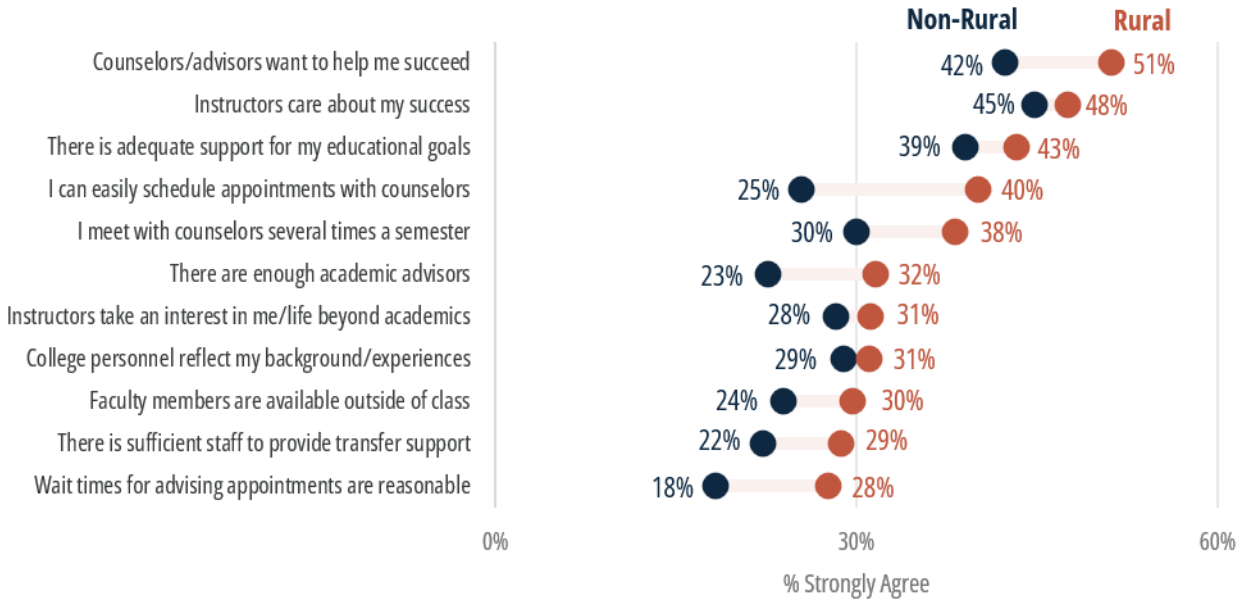
Rural Colleges Are Invested in and Accessible to Students, But That Asset Is Not Being Sufficiently Utilized

Survey data reveal that rural students reported meaningfully stronger institutional relationships and greater access to campus personnel than their non-rural peers. Specifically, rural respondents were more likely to strongly agree that their counselors and advisors genuinely want them to succeed (51% vs. 42% among non-rural students) and that they can easily schedule appointments when needed (40% vs. 25% among non-rural students). Rural respondents also reported higher satisfaction with advisor wait times (28% vs. 18%), greater faculty availability outside of class (30% vs. 24% among non-rural students), and stronger belief that their college has sufficient staff to provide transfer support (29% vs. 22% among non-rural students). Furthermore, rural respondents met with counselors or advisors more frequently, with 38% reporting several meetings a semester, compared to 30% of non-rural students (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6

Rural students report meaningfully stronger institutional relationships and greater access to campus personnel than their non-rural peers

Perceptions of Institutional Support and Relationships, Rural vs. Non-Rural Respondents

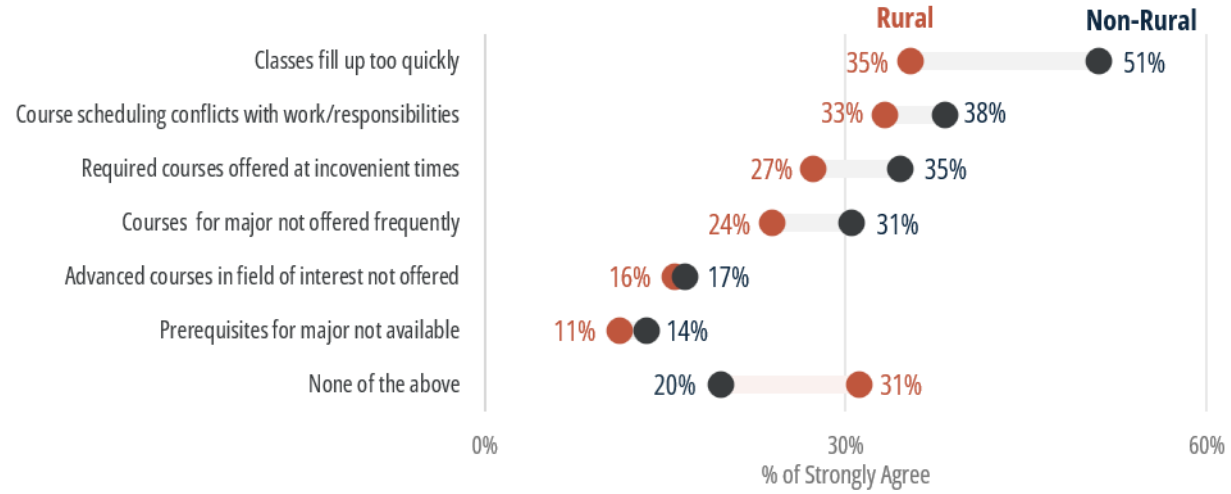


In addition to relational access, rural respondents experienced fewer administrative and logistical hurdles in accessing courses (see Figure 7). Rural survey respondents were less likely to report that classes fill up too quickly (35% vs. 51% among non-rural students) or that courses for their major are not offered frequently enough (24% vs. 31%). Taken together, these findings indicate that the rural campus environment is, by both measures, more accessible and more relational than non-rural institutions, providing a strong foundation of investment and access that colleges can leverage when designing transfer interventions.

FIGURE 7

Rural students report fewer administrative and logistical hurdles

Course Access Challenges, Rural vs. Non-Rural Respondents



While these survey findings highlight high levels of perceived support, they must be interpreted alongside qualitative evidence from practitioners gathered during the *Rural Matters* study (Segovia et al., 2026). Administrators at rural colleges described being severely stretched by budget constraints, which forced staff to wear multiple hats, for example, counselors serving as transfer center directors, general advisors, and support for specialized populations.

The apparent contradiction between high student satisfaction and limited staff capacity is resolved when examining the scope of the survey measures. Students were asked whether there were enough advisors available to meet with students generally, not whether college staff were dedicated exclusively to transfer expertise. Since many rural colleges lack counselors whose sole focus is transfer advising, a student can easily access a general counselor and perceive that service as readily available yet still lack the specialized transfer guidance needed to move students from intention to action. The following quotes from rural college administrators in the prior *Rural Matters* report (Segovia et al., 2026) capture how they describe this tension in their own words.

> *"[Rural colleges] kind of get treated a little bit like the ugly stepchild a bit when it comes to the other … transfer institutions. And then we don't have enough support. Support within transfer to potentially be able to make that really a true focus. And* ***we don't have enough support staff that's available*** *and … faculty too, to help ensure that our students are transferring."*
>
> *- RURAL COLLEGE ADMINISTRATOR*

> *"That's a staple of rural colleges and small colleges in general, is we piggyback, piggyback, piggyback.* ***Everybody's wearing multiple hats and doing multiple goals all at the same time.*** *We have lamented and, quite honestly, really even cried about the idea that we really should have more to give to transfer. And we know we are neglecting it. I think that's pretty universally agreed on."*
>
> *- RURAL COLLEGE ADMINISTRATOR*

CCC Baccalaureate Degree Program Awareness and Openness

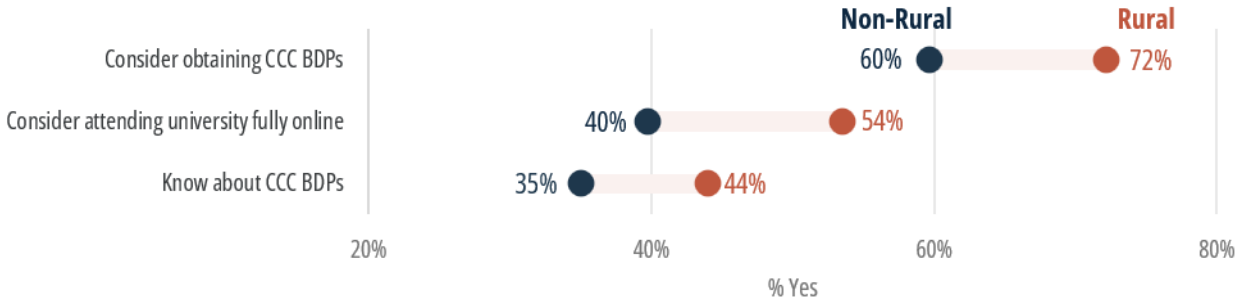
Survey respondents in rural areas demonstrated significantly greater awareness of and openness to community college Baccalaureate Degree Programs (BDPs) than their non-rural peers. Nearly three-quarters of rural students (72%) indicated that they would consider a BDP, compared to 60% of non-rural students. Rural students were also more likely to know that some CCCs now offer bachelor's degrees (44% vs. 35% among non-rural students) and showed greater openness to attending a university entirely online (54% vs. 40%). In short, rural students are more likely to report wanting a bachelor's degree that does not require them to leave home, whether through a BDP at their local CCC or a fully online university degree program (see Figure 8 on the next page).

Among respondents who declined to consider a BDP, their underlying reasons differed by geography. Rural respondents who opted out were more likely than non-rural respondents to state that the job they want does not require a bachelor's degree (15% vs. 8%). Conversely, non-rural students who declined were more likely to express a preference for a University of California, California State University, or private institution (47% vs. 31% among rural students).

FIGURE 8

Rural students demonstrate significantly greater awareness of and openness to community college Baccalaureate Degree Programs and universities fully online than their non-rural peers.

Opinions about Baccalaureate Degree Programs and Online Programs, Rural vs. Non-Rural Respondents



Note: CCC = California Community College; BDPs = Baccalaureate Degree Programs

What Students Need: Shared Priorities With Key Nuances

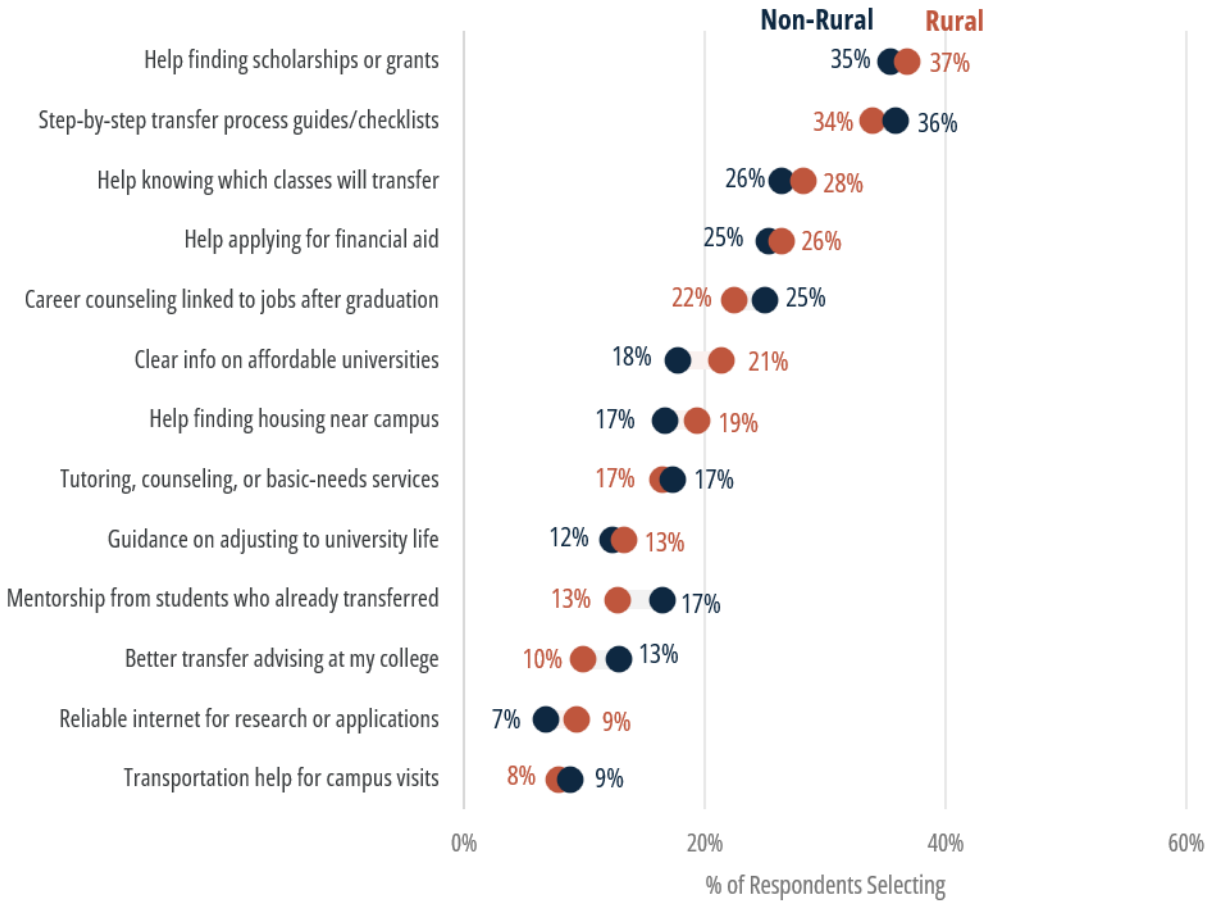
When asked which resources would be or would have been most helpful when considering transfer, respondents across both rural and non-rural colleges most commonly identified assistance with finding scholarships or grants and step-by-step guides or checklists for the transfer process (see Figure 9). This convergence on informational and navigational support is an important signal: The interventions students value center on clarity, guidance, and connection.

Regarding social support, rural and non-rural respondents reported similar expectations about their transfer destinations. When asked whether they would have a strong support system available at a university after transferring, respondents in both groups agreed at the same rate (48%). Rural students were only slightly less likely than non-rural students to report that their families would be very supportive of transfer if it required relocating (48% vs. 52%). In both cases, perceived social support at the destination institution did not emerge as a primary differentiating factor between rural and non-rural respondents. These similar expectations suggest that social support at the destination institution is not a distinguishing barrier for rural students, and that intervention efforts are better directed toward the gaps that do differentiate the two groups, such as geographic access, navigation support, and encouraging institutional messaging.

FIGURE 9

Both rural and non-rural students value resources centering on clarity, guidance, and connection

Most Desired Transfer Support Resources, Rural vs. Non-Rural Respondents





Recommendations

The survey findings add quantitative grounding and specificity to three high-level challenges identified in prior phases of this research:

1. The transfer information and navigation gap;
2. The structural barriers created by geography; and
3. The institutional and policy conditions that either enable or foreclose transfer for rural students.

The following recommendations are organized by audience and grounded directly in the evidence. While all recommendations apply broadly to rural colleges, those focused on geographic access and place-based programs are most urgent for colleges in University Deserts, where distance compounds every other barrier.

Recommendations for Community Colleges

1. Close the Navigation Gap Through Proactive, Counselor–Led Guidance

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.

Rural students report less familiarity with transfer steps than non-rural students and are less likely to use online tools to explore transfer options, visit university websites, or attend transfer fairs. They take more of their classes online than students in non-rural regions, showing they are comfortable with digital tools as a learning medium—yet that comfort has not translated into using those same tools for transfer research, indicating that students are not being proactively guided to make that connection. The data also show that both rural and non-rural students converge on the same top needs: step-by-step guides and help finding financial support. **Passive solutions, such as a resource on a website, will not reach students who are less likely to initiate the search on their own.**

The counselor relationship is the highest-leverage delivery mechanism available, and rural students find their counselors more invested in their success than non-rural students do. Counselors must be empowered and supported to serve as active architects of transfer pathways who:

- Provide step-by-step guides and checklists proactively;
- Host regular on-campus visits from university admissions representatives, with structured one-on-one meeting opportunities; and
- Guide students through online university research together during advising appointments, using curated lists of reputable tools, rather than directing students to navigate independently.

Structured transfer research workshops embedded in existing courses can build these skills in context. For campuses where in-person university visits are logistically difficult, virtual alternatives delivered through the learning management systems students already use are a viable and underutilized substitute. Organizing campus tours or shadow days with transportation provided can be transformative for students who have never visited a university campus and for whom transfer remains abstract.

The California Virtual Campus (CVC) represents an existing, underpublicized resource for rural students: It provides access to online coursework across the system and can serve as

both a pathway to transfer-level courses and a window into online degree options at universities. **Counselors need to be equipped to guide students proactively through CVC resources during transfer-planning conversations, rather than treating CVC solely as a course-access tool.**

To make these activities possible, **counselors need protected time for proactive advising, professional development on transfer pathways and university partnerships, and basic technology resources**, such as reliable internet, laptops, and curated tool lists, to do this work effectively alongside students.

2. Build and Formalize Peer Transfer Networks

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

Peer networks are among the strongest correlates of transfer consideration in the data, and **rural students score lower than non-rural students on every measure of transfer social capital**—the peer connections, role models, and social networks that make transfer feel like a real and achievable path. These students typically have fewer connections with successful transfers and engage in fewer discussions about the possibility of doing so. When no one in a student's immediate world has made the transfer journey, the pathway feels less real and much less navigable.

Colleges need to invest in building the social infrastructure that makes transfer feel normal and achievable. This investment means **developing formal mentorship programs that connect current rural students with alumni who successfully transferred**—centering people from similar geographic and demographic backgrounds whose stories resonate because they are not abstract. Cohort-based programs can build community among transfer-interested students, reducing the isolation that makes transfer feel like an individual departure rather than a shared path. Visibly celebrating transfer success in campus communications, events, and social media turns students who do transfer into visible role models, rather than them quietly disappearing into a pipeline no one talks about. Online platforms can extend these peer networks beyond the limits of a small rural campus, connecting students who have successfully transferred with transfer-intending students at other colleges across the state.

3. 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.

Rural students are less likely than non-rural students to report that the messages they have received about transfer have been mostly encouraging. Yet, they show no lower confidence in their ability to handle university-level academic work. **The gap is environmental and institutionally produced by the messages colleges send, or fail to send, about who is best suited for transfer, rather than anything about students' own readiness or belief in themselves.**

Colleges must actively cultivate an environment that consistently communicates that transfer is achievable and is for everyone. Cultivating a transfer environment requires **training all instructional and counseling faculty and staff to speak positively and knowledgeably about transfer options and to actively challenge deficit narratives**—the subtle and not-so-subtle messages that suggest rural students are not ready for or suited to succeed at the university. Transfer must be framed as aligned with students' existing career goals, not as leaving the community behind. The self-reinforcing cycle in which having fewer transfer role models leads to a lack of encouraging messaging, which suppresses students' aspirations, which produces even fewer transfer-goers, can only be broken through intentional, sustained effort at every level of institutional culture.

4. Expand Community College Baccalaureate Degree Programs That Align With Rural Career Pathways

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

The demand for community college BDPs among rural students is striking: **72% said they would consider a BDP, compared to 60% of non-rural students**. Rural students are also more likely than their non-rural peers to know these programs exist. Rural students do not need to be convinced of the value of place-based baccalaureate options. The barrier is the lack of baccalaureate programs that directly connect to local careers. When rural students who declined to consider a BDP explained their reasoning, the reason cited more often by rural students than by their non-rural peers was that the job they wanted did not

require a bachelor's degree, which may reflect local labor market realities rather than a rejection of higher education itself.

Colleges must conduct community needs assessments to identify which bachelor's degree programs would serve local labor markets and align with student interests, prioritizing fields such as education, healthcare, business, and technology that are both career-relevant and compatible with the online and hybrid delivery models rural students need. Programs that require full-time on-campus attendance in a location students cannot reach are not solutions for this population. The goal is to match program supply to demonstrated local or regional demand and to proactively communicate existing programs, leveraging the higher BDP awareness already present among rural students as a starting point for enrollment.

5. Recognize and Design for Students With Dependents

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

Rural students are significantly more likely to have dependents to care for and, among those with dependents, substantially more likely to be single parents. The standard transfer pathway assumes a student can relocate to attend a university full-time. For a student who is the sole caregiver for young children, that assumption renders the standard pathway structurally unavailable, and the survey's demographic profile of rural students suggests that caregiving responsibility of this kind is not a rare exception but a defining feature of the population.

Transfer support for this population must be designed with these realities at the center. **Counselors must proactively include childcare options at destination universities in transfer conversations, rather than waiting for students to ask.** Financial planning resources need to explicitly model dependent care costs alongside tuition and housing, giving students an accurate picture of what transfer would require. Connections to flexible degree pathways—evening, weekend, and fully online programs—must be built into standard advising for students with family responsibilities. Finally, colleges need to advocate directly with destination universities for family-friendly housing options. The logistical barriers are real; meeting them requires designing support that acknowledges they exist.

Recommendation for University Partners

6. Expand and 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.

The data show that rural students are more open to online university pathways and community college BDPs than their non-rural peers. Yet, **they are less likely to have used online tools to explore transfer options.** UC, CSU, and private nonprofit university partners have a role to play that goes beyond waiting for rural students to find them. Universities need to be encouraged—and where possible, funded—to develop intentional outreach strategies targeting students at rural and University Desert colleges, including dedicated admissions counselors with rural portfolios, virtual recruitment events delivered through learning management systems rural students already use, and **pipeline agreements that create named pathways from specific rural colleges to specific university programs.** The California Virtual Campus (CVC) is an underutilized vehicle for reaching rural students: Its infrastructure connects rural students to online coursework across the CCC system and could be leveraged more deliberately as a transfer exploration and pathway-planning tool, with explicit outreach to rural students about available online degree options.

Recommendations for Policymakers and System Leaders

7. Address the Rural Penalty in Funding Formulas

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.

Standard transfer support activities (e.g., university visits, transfer fairs, dedicated transfer counseling, financial aid workshops) cost significantly more to deliver at rural University Desert colleges than at non-rural institutions. When a university representative has to travel eight hours round-trip to reach a CCC campus, when a transfer fair must be

organized by a counselor already managing a heavy caseload, and when there is no nearby infrastructure of peer support and university presence to draw on, the per-student cost of doing transfer well is structurally higher. **Current funding formulas do not account for this cost differential.** The result is a system in which the colleges serving students who most need transfer support are the least resourced to provide it.

Funding formulas need to include specific adjustments for rural college transfer costs, recognizing geographic isolation as a cost driver in the same way other equity-related factors are acknowledged. These adjustments must apply to the Student-Centered Funding Formula (SCFF), which currently relies on urban-centric baselines that do not reflect the true cost of delivering education and student support in geographically isolated regions. Incentive funding for rural colleges that expand BDP offerings or establish university partnership programs serving place-bound students would accelerate the supply-side expansion that rural students are waiting for. This recommendation is a direct extension of the *Rural Matters* (Segovia et al., 2026) findings on the rural funding penalty, now backed by survey data showing that the resource gap produces measurable differences in student actions.

Beyond funding formula adjustments, policymakers must take two additional steps. First, the sustainability and continuity of categorical programs, including the Student Equity and Achievement Program (SEAP), TRIO (a federal umbrella of student support programs), Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), and the Strong Workforce Program, must be protected. These programs currently serve as the primary support infrastructure for many rural colleges, and their fragmentation across funding streams creates duplication of administrative effort and service instability. Consolidating or streamlining reporting requirements and ensuring that these programs can build on one another rather than duplicate efforts serving the same students would increase their long-term impact.

Second, policymakers need to consider granting regional dispensations from the program authorization requirements colleges must meet to launch new degree programs, such as extensive documentation, needs assessments, and multi-step review processes that assume a level of dedicated administrative staff many rural colleges do not have. This process imposes disproportionate constraints and burdens on geographically isolated institutions with thin administrative capacity. A policy designed for a suburban college with a dedicated transfer center staff of five must not bind a rural college where one counselor serves every student support function simultaneously.

8. Reform or Expand Exemptions to 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.

California's 50% Law requires that community colleges spend at least half of their funds on direct instructional costs, thereby limiting how much can be allocated to student support services. For rural and small colleges, which already face constrained budgets and are most dependent on student services to compensate for structural access gaps, this constraint falls with particular force on exactly the services this survey shows students most need: counseling, transfer advising, and financial literacy programming.

The case for reform here rests primarily on practitioner evidence: In the interview phase of this study, **practitioners across rural colleges described the 50% Law as the single most constraining structural factor in their ability to serve transfer students**. The survey provides corroborating context by showing that the student services the law constrains (counseling, transfer advising, and financial literacy programming) are precisely those that students identify as most valuable. Together, these two data sources—practitioners naming the constraint and students naming the need—point to the same conclusion: The 50% Law is constraining precisely the services students say they need most. Modifying the law to broaden the definition of instructional costs to include student support services that directly enable educational progression and/or to expand exemptions for rural and small colleges would have an outsized impact on institutions with the greatest demonstrated need.

9. Expand and Target Place–Based Baccalaureate 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.

Rural students are more likely than non-rural students to say they would only consider transfer if they could complete the degree entirely online, and the demand for community college BDPs is highest precisely in the communities where moving to attend a university is least feasible. Rural and non-rural students report similar confidence in their ability to build a strong support system at their destination university. **The policy target, the data suggest, is access to the pathway itself.**

Policymakers need to expand authorization for community college baccalaureate degree programs, prioritizing rural colleges and fields aligned with regional labor markets. University partnerships that deliver online or hybrid degree-completion programs on rural community college campuses need to be actively funded and incentivized. Progress must be measured: **Program completion rates and labor market outcomes for rural students need to be tracked and publicly reported**, so that the system can assess whether expansion efforts are meeting the demand documented in the survey.



Conclusion

The central message of this survey is that **rural students are ambitious, capable, and ready to transfer when the system makes it possible.** The data demonstrate these students' readiness with consistency across every measure that might suggest otherwise:

- Rural students consider transfer at lower rates than their non-rural peers overall, but this gap is driven primarily by those in University Deserts (UDs). **Rural students outside of UDs transfer at rates equal to or higher than non-rural students**, suggesting that rurality itself does not suppress ambition.
- **Rural students find their community college counselors and staff more invested in their success** than non-rural students and report more accessible advising, smaller class-access barriers, and more frequent counselor contact.
- **Rural students show no lower academic self-confidence than their non-rural peers.** The discouragement they face is environmental—coming from thin peer networks and less encouraging institutional messaging, rather than from any deficit in their own belief in their abilities.
- **Rural students show dramatically higher openness to CCC Baccalaureate Degree Programs and online degree pathways than their non-rural peers.** Demand for place-based and flexible bachelor's degree solutions is high and waiting to be met.

What is missing is a system designed to convert these strengths into outcomes. The geographic barriers documented here (distance from universities, Navigation Deserts, weak peer networks, lack of encouraging institutional messaging, inadequate funding for transfer support) are not immovable.

For college and district leaders, the most important shift is from passive to proactive. Transfer information delivered upon request will not reach the students who most need it. Counselors seen by their students as invested in their success must be empowered, with protected time, university partnerships, and curated tools, to serve as active architects of transfer pathways, guiding students through the navigation process rather than waiting for students to initiate that process. The demand for place-based and flexible bachelor's degree options is already there; 72% of rural students said they would consider a community college Baccalaureate Degree Program. The work is building the supply and the guidance infrastructure to meet it. For colleges, that means building the guidance infrastructure to connect students to transfer pathways. For policymakers, it means expanding the supply of place-based degree options to match existing demand.

For policymakers and system leaders, the most important shift is from treating rural students as a niche concern to recognizing that **geographic equity is foundational to the community college system's equity mission**. Funding formulas, program authorization, and the 50% Law all shape the conditions in which rural students make transfer decisions and serve as levers policymakers have not yet been fully used.

Students in rural education deserts are already working, already studying, already planning for what comes next, carrying full lives and full ambitions. The work ahead for colleges, universities, and policymakers is building a system worthy of their ambition and ability.

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Appendix

Table A1

Participating California Community Colleges by Geographic Category

College	RSI Score	IPEDS Category	Miles to Nearest Public University	Nearest Public University
Rural University Desert				
Barstow Community College	0.21	Town	68.1	CSU San Bernardino
Cerro Coso Community College	0.57	Rural	109.3	CSU San Bernardino
College of the Siskiyous	2.55	Town	210.7	Cal Poly Humboldt
Feather River College	3.03	Rural	87.1	CSU Chico
Imperial Valley College	1.04	Rural	112.4	San Diego State
Lake Tahoe Community College	0.83	Rural	99.0	CSU Sacramento
Lassen Community College	2.92	Rural	105.1	CSU Chico
Reedley College	0.76	Town	30.7	CSU Fresno
Shasta College	1.65	Suburb-Midsize	76.7	CSU Chico
Taft College	0.58	Town	30.6	CSU Bakersfield
Rural Non-University Desert				
College of the Redwoods	2.06	Rural	8.4	Cal Poly Humboldt
Crafton Hills College	0.21	Rural	21.3	UC Riverside
Madera Community College	n/a	Rural	20.6	CSU Fresno
Non-Rural Non-University Desert				
Bakersfield College	0.58	City-Large	11.2	CSU Bakersfield
Berkeley City College	0.03	City-Midsize	0.8	UC Berkeley
City College of San Francisco	0.02	City-Large	1.6	San Francisco State
Clovis Community College	0.69	City-Large	3.4	CSU Fresno
Fresno City College	0.68	City-Large	10.1	CSU Fresno
Hartnell College	0.60	City-Midsize	10.5	CSU Monterey Bay
Irvine Valley College	0.03	City-Large	5.5	UC Irvine
Pasadena City College	0.05	City-Midsize	8.9	CSU Los Angeles
Saddleback College	0.03	Suburb-Large	17.0	UC Irvine

Notes: The table includes only colleges with 10 or more survey respondents. RSI = rural-serving institution. The nearest public university reflects the closest UC or CSU campus. This calculation does not account for public universities in neighboring states (e.g., Nevada, Oregon, Arizona) that may be geographically closer to some California colleges, particularly those near state borders.

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The RP Group

The RP Group is a leader that supports equitable outcomes for minoritized and marginalized students through race-conscious, equity-minded research, planning, and professional development. We uplift student voices and empower researchers and planners to improve institutional effectiveness by dismantling systemic barriers and injustices.

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