Transfer Among Rural Learners in California

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The RP Group
Rural Pathways Project Institute 4
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TheRPGroup



Agenda

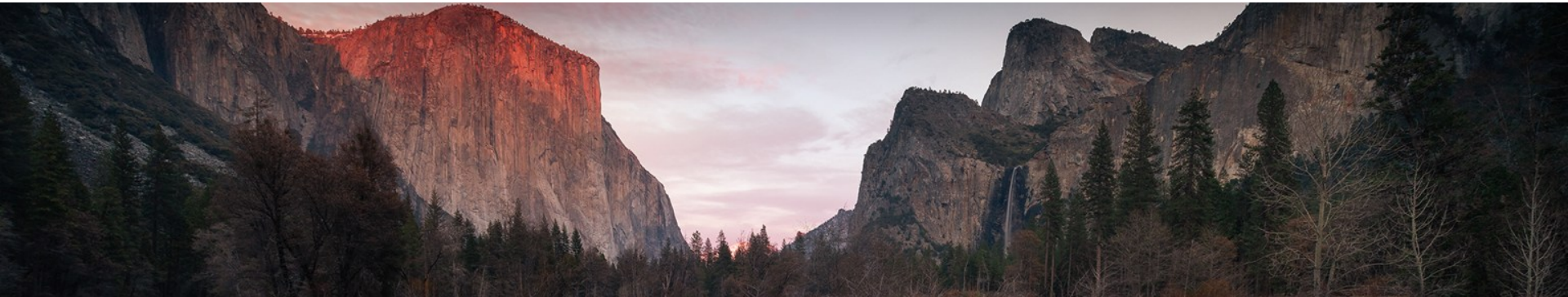
01 **The CA Transfer Landscape**

02 **A Focus on Rural Learners**
Findings from our rural transfer research

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

01

CA Transfer Landscape

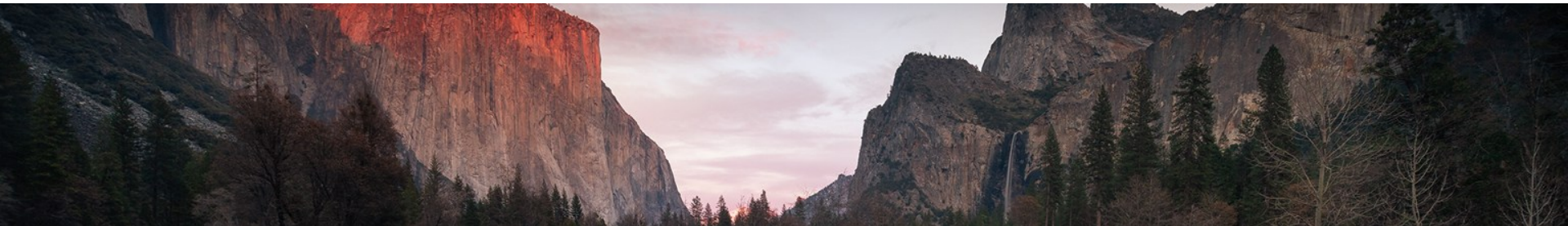


The Value of a University Degree

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

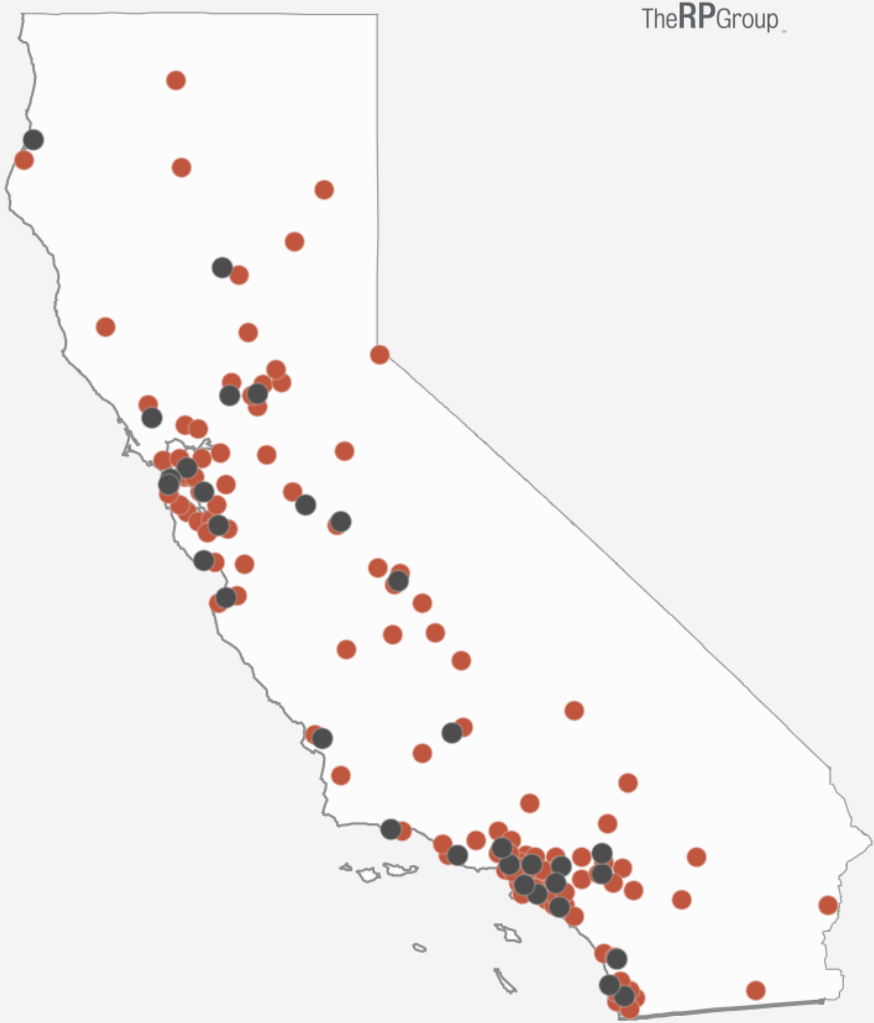
Degree attainment is not equal across all groups or regions

- 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**.

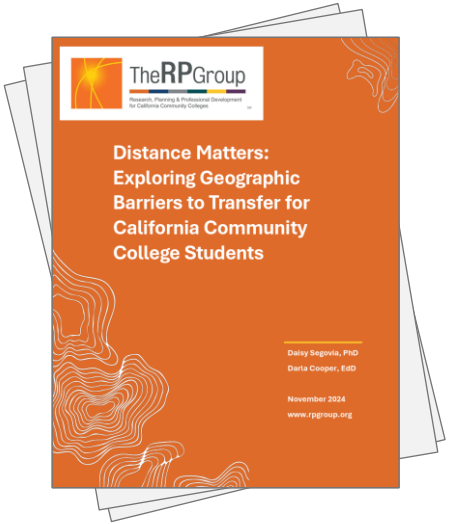
California's Education System

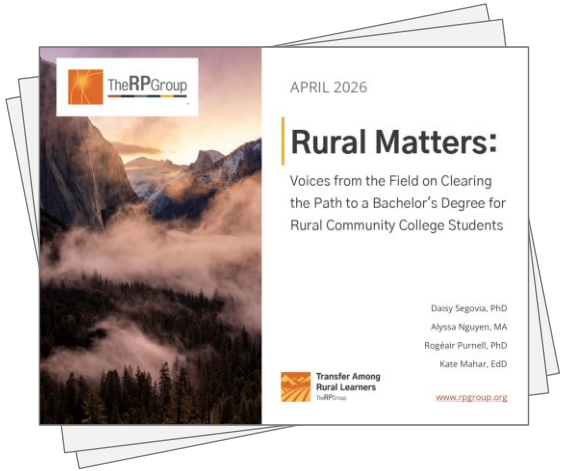
- **32 CA Public Universities**
  - 23 California State University campuses
  - 9 University of California campuses
- **116 CA Community Colleges**
  - 115 Community Colleges with physical locations
  - 1 Community College fully online



Distance Matters

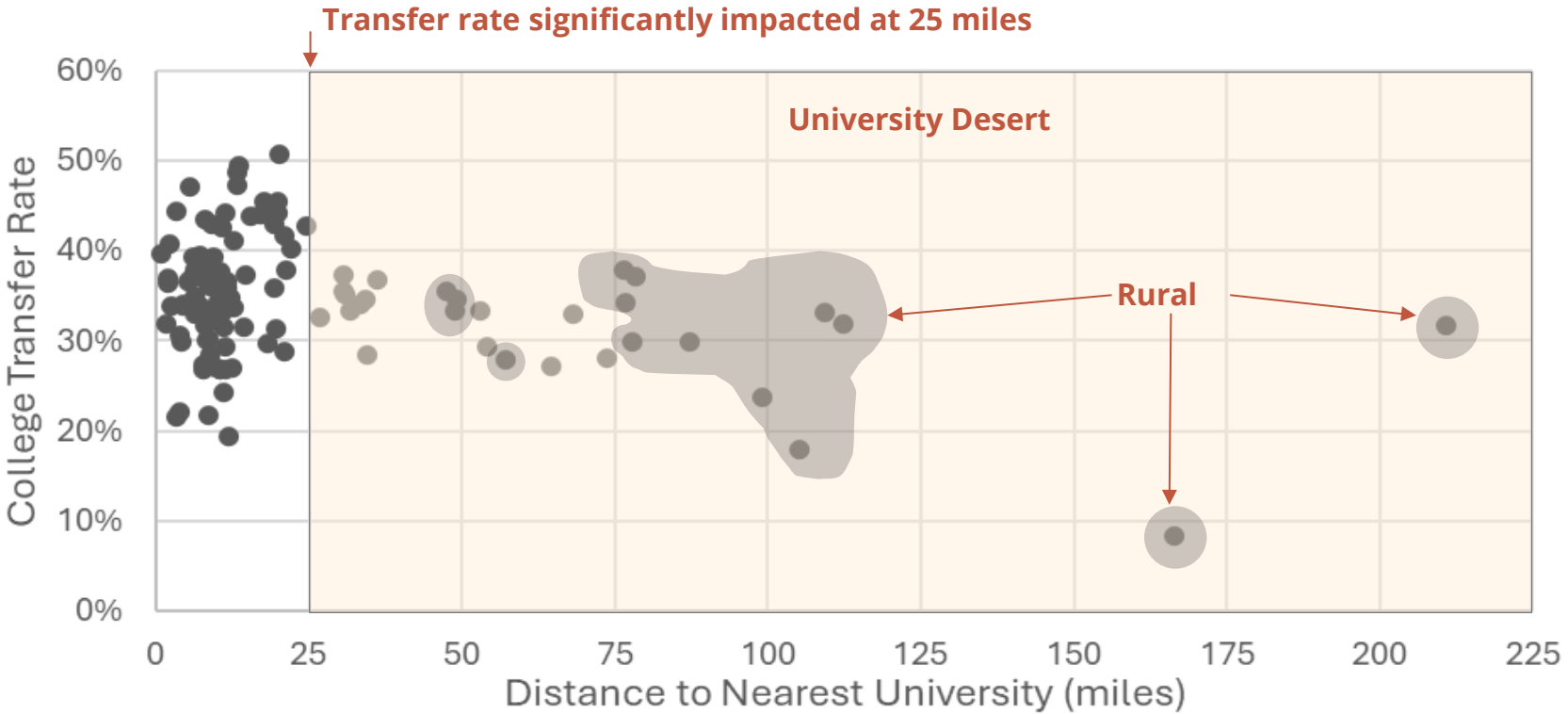
Once community college students are ready to transfer to a university, the **location may affect their options.**







College Transfer Rates by Distance



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

Rurality in California

Rural areas in California are vast, varied, and distinct from the state's large urban centers

- Service areas span 8,000 to 10,000 square miles
- Geographical settings vary from mountains, forests, deserts, and agricultural regions









02

A Focus on Rural Learners





The Current Study

Phase 1: Talking to Rural Students & College Personnel

- Interviews and focus groups at 15 rural colleges
- 30 college practitioners
- 62 students

Phase 2:Survey of Rural & Non-Rural Students

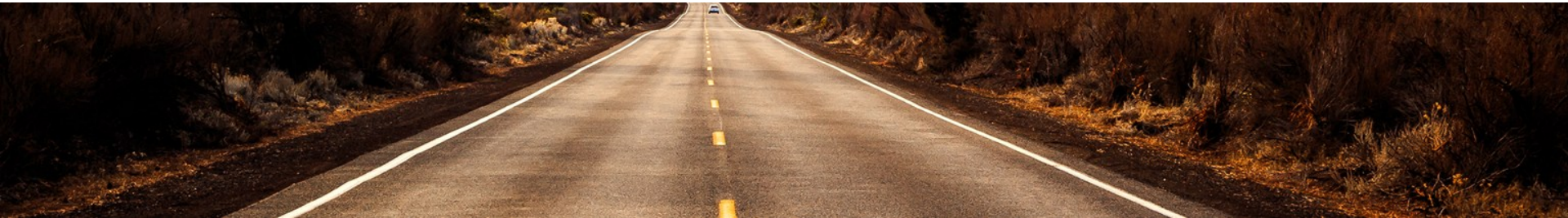
- Surveyed 5,682 students across 25 CA community colleges
- What factors drive transfer decisions?

Phase 1: Interviews & Focus Groups

Distance Equals…

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

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





Distance Equals Money

- **Financial concerns were a prominent theme** among the interviewed rural students and college personnel.

- These concerns involved not only the sources of funding but also the **strategic management of those funds**.



The Student Penalty

The financial burden of attending a university led students to prioritize tuition, financial aid, and proximity to home when choosing to transfer.

Costs of Relocation

Transferring requires moving to expensive urban centers, leading to higher housing costs and the loss of local employment or family-sustaining wages.

Voicing the Financial Burden

"[Students say:] 'I am one of the contributing members of my household to keep our household afloat. And ***if I physically go, that's going to put financial strain on my family****.' So, it's not just the distance itself, but what is the cost of the distance?"*

- College Practitioner

*"... I didn't want to go too far because... my job was already here and...****financial stability is a big thing for me.*** *So, I didn't want to just uproot and be like a broke college student..."*

- Transferred Student



The Institutional Penalty

Rural colleges spend more per student to deliver comparable services because of travel time, limited staffing, and a lack of nearby partners or wraparound service providers.

The Institutional Cost Multiplier

Rural colleges face severe resource constraints, compounded by policies like the 50% Law, leading to underfunded, multi-tasked student services like transfer counseling.

Innovation by Necessity

Budget inflexibility forces rural institutions to pool categorical monies, restructure positions to enable staff to fulfill multiple roles, and seek funding sources outside their regions.



*"I'm an **academic counselor currently serving as the transfer counselor, plus transfer center director**, [and serving] athletes, international students, Promise [program students], and veterans."*

- College Practitioner

The Rural Penalty

Practitioners specifically cite policies such as California's 50% Law as a major barrier to budget flexibility, leading to the consolidation of staff roles to maintain service levels.

Budget Inflexibility

*"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."*

- College Practitioner

*"...the fact that...technology, software, counseling, and librarians, [as well as] all of the support services and all of the **operational things that make colleges functional are on the wrong side [of the 50% law]**."*

- College Practitioner

Distance Equals Connections

- **Connections emerged as another prominent theme** among the students and employees interviewed.

- Connections **came in multiple forms**, including those among individuals, families, and surrounding communities, as well as between institutions.



Social Capital for Students

Social Networks are Vital

For students, transfer decisions are heavily influenced by strong community ties, family pressures, and transportation limits, making local social capital a necessity for student persistence.



Pressure to Remain Close to Home

"I've got a 10-year-old son, and he's my world, so that's definitely going to keep me from going [to] college somewhere else. So, that's why ***I'm looking toward the online and... staying local.***"

- Current CCC Student

"I would say that ***without my family's support*** *and the background and the guidance of my mentors, such as professors or people in the math lab,* ***continuing that momentum would be difficult.***"

- Current CCC Student

Institutional Strategic Partnerships are Key

- **Engine for Innovation**

  For rural colleges, strategic partnerships act as an engine for innovation, enabling colleges to overcome geographic isolation by deploying bold strategies that fundamentally transform access to transfer pathways.

- **Rural colleges utilize their strategic partnerships to deploy strategies that increase access to transfer pathways.**

Utilizing Strategic Partnerships

*"**As long as they do what they're supposed to do** to transfer to a CSU and UC, [the students] **are pretty much accepted** into Southern Utah [University]."*

- College Practitioner

*"There's also a **barrier with even our [university] reps coming out here because of the distance**... It's been difficult to get the face-to-face in exchanges with UC reps, Cal Poly reps."*

- College Practitioner

The Rural Reality

These interviews and focus groups provided critical insights into the lived reality of the rural transfer experience.

- **Geographic Isolation** acts as a barrier multiplier
- **Social disconnection** hinders vital peer and institutional connections essential for transfer



Phase 2: Statewide Survey

The Navigation Desert

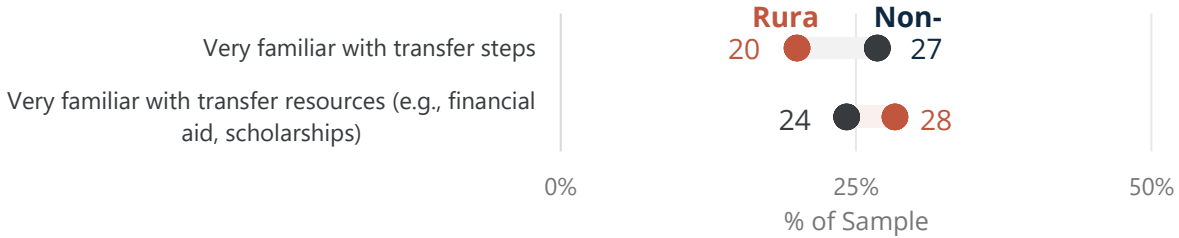
- The data reveal a **navigation gap**: a critical lack of awareness of which transfer resources exist, where to find them, and how to use them effectively.



Information Gap

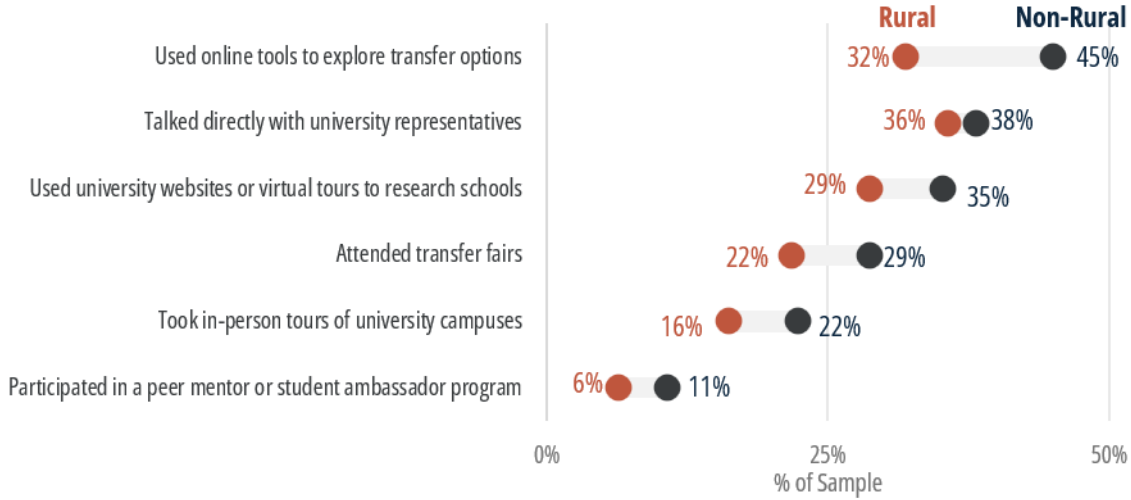
- Rural students are significantly **less familiar with the procedural steps of transfer** (20% vs. 27% among non-rural students)
  - But more familiar with transfer **resources**





Underutilized Tools

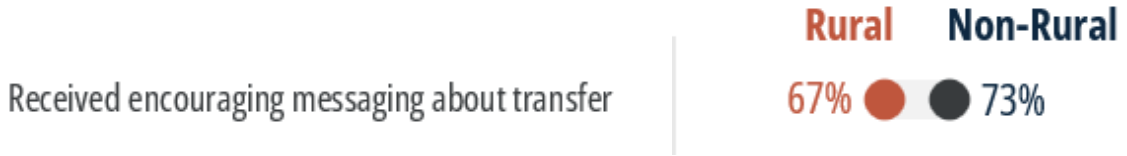
- Despite being technologically fluent, rural students are less likely to:
  - Have used online research tools
  - Attended transfer fairs
  - Taken campus tours

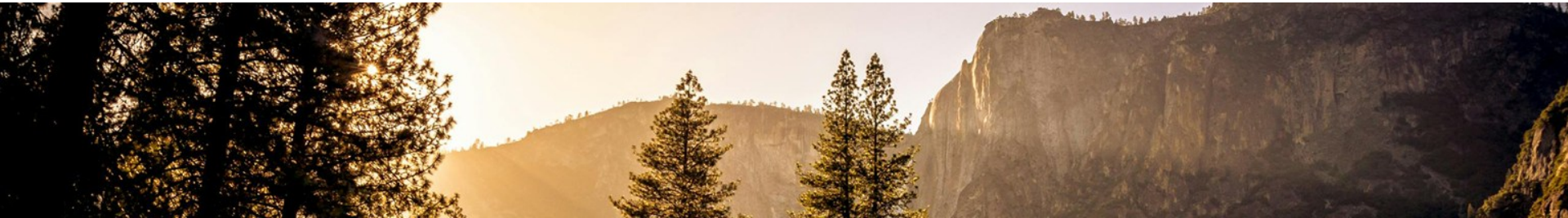


33% of rural students reported participating in **ZERO transfer-focused activities**, compared to 20% of non-rural students.

Lack of Encouraging Messaging

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





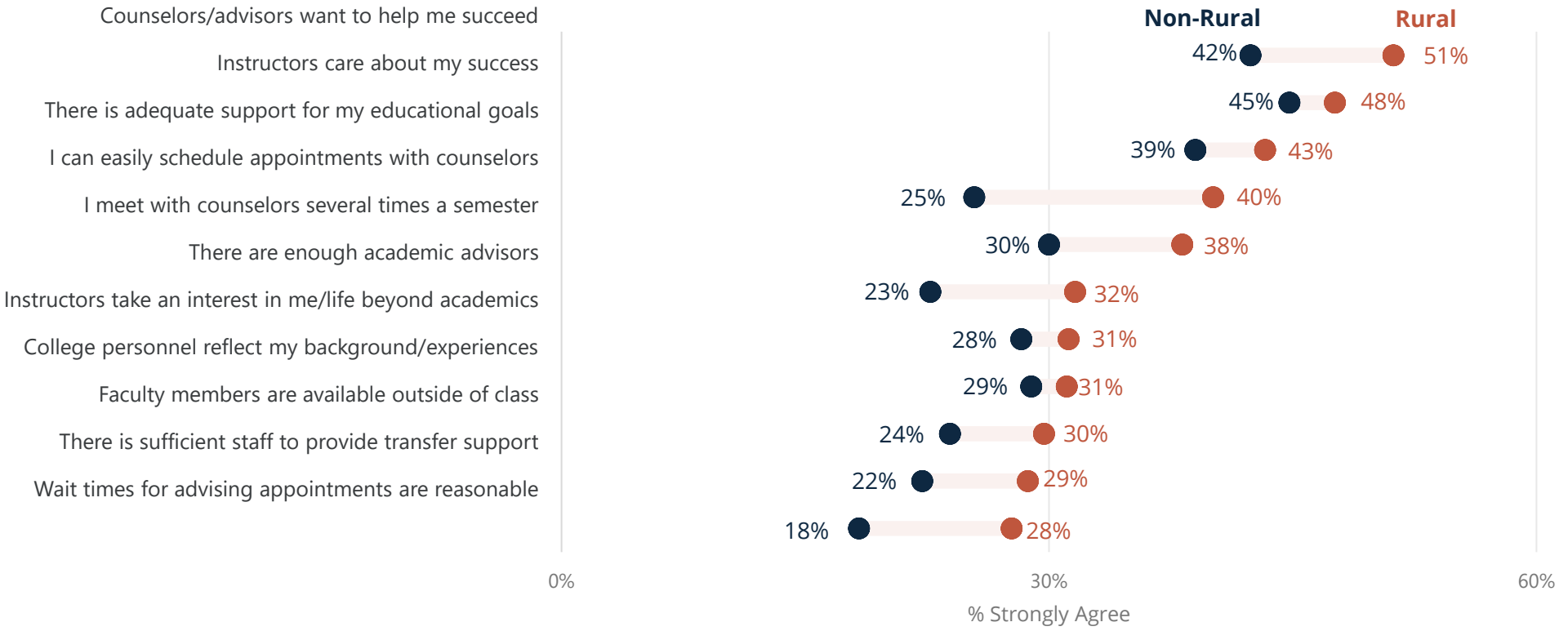
Role Model Scarcity

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





Strong 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:**

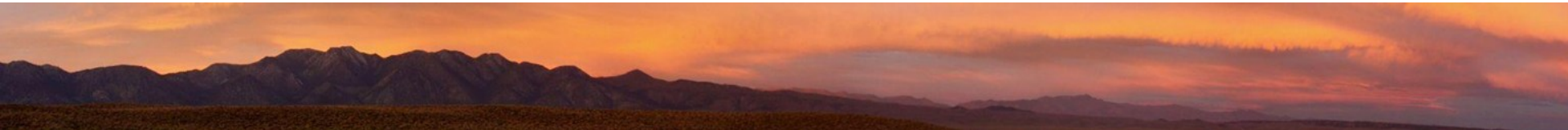
  There is a high demand for fully online university pathways that allow students to remain in their communities while earning a degree.



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

What Facilitates Transfer



Statewide Recommendations

Understanding the barriers to transfer created by geographic distance, along with the structural challenges inherent in California's higher education system, is essential for designing solutions that are both creative and targeted.

Community colleges, university partners, and policymakers should:

- Support a stronger transfer culture
- Expand place-based baccalaureate options
- Address policy and practices disproportionately affecting rural and University Desert colleges

Programs Positively Impacting Transfer

Shasta College

Bachelor's Through Online & Local Degrees (BOLD)

- Launched to serve adult learners who are unable to relocate for a university education.
- Pairs students with counselors to identify high-quality online degree options



Bachelor's Through Online & Local Degrees (BOLD)

IN THIS SECTION +

Dream of a bachelor's degree but not sure where to start? BOLD can make it a reality!

Shasta College's BOLD program is designed to provide comprehensive support to Shasta College students pursuing an online bachelor's degree. We understand that navigating the world of online education can be overwhelming, so we're here to guide you every step of the way. From helping you identify accredited, affordable programs that align with your career goals to exploring financial aid options and simplifying the often-complex transfer process, BOLD is your partner in achieving your educational aspirations. Don't let your dream degree remain just a dream – take the first step with BOLD today!

TRIO

TRIO Student Support Services Program

- Federal program aimed to enhance retention & completion rates
- Provides academic tutoring, course advisement, & financial aid support
- Since TRIO funds are not counted under the 50% Law, they can also support counseling staff, college visits, and transfer fairs.

Tuition Reciprocation Programs

Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE)

- Discount caps tuition at 150% for out-of-state students enrolling at participating universities
- Average costs savings of $50,000 over 4 years

WICHE
Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

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Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE)

WUE Provides Students Greater Access to College with Reduced Tuition Rates at Participating Schools

Going to college out of state may mean paying up to three times more than attending a school or university in your home state/territory*. The Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE) was established in 1987 to make college more affordable and accessible to students in the West.

Through WUE, students from the WICHE region* can choose from hundreds of undergraduate programs across the West and pay no more than 150% of the institution's resident tuition rate.

Today, more than 170 public colleges and universities offer reduced tuition rates through WUE to qualifying students. Participating schools offer these discounted rates to help students avoid the full cost of pursuing higher education outside their home state and minimize the impact of student loan debt.

Expanding Online Course Offerings

California Virtual College–Online Education Initiative (CVC-OEI)

- Established in 2013 to offer inclusive, high-quality online courses and programs
- Increases student access to fully-online courses that proposal students toward completion



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 Project Page

Transfer Among Rural Learners
www.rpgroup.org/projects/rural-transfer