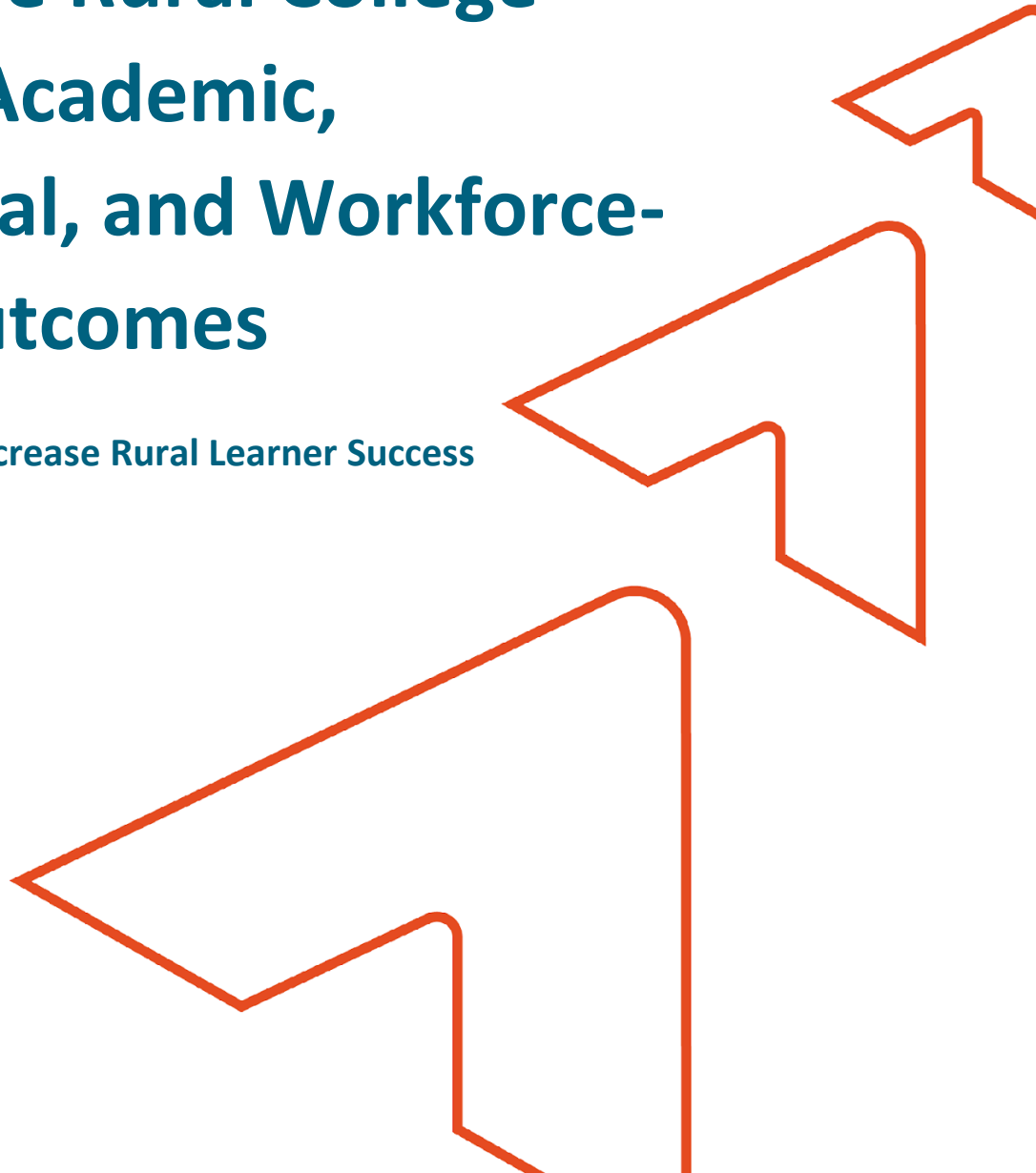


Project Summary

The Effect of Institutional Programs and Practices on Low-Income Rural College Students' Academic, Psychosocial, and Workforce-Related Outcomes

Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success



The Effect of Institutional Programs and Practices on Low-income Rural College Students' Academic, Psychosocial, and Workforce-Related Outcomes

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Institutional policies aimed at reducing structural barriers and expanding access to career development activities, financial support, and mental health resources can enhance rural college students' educational progress, workforce transitions, and well-being, particularly among first-generation and working-class rural students.

— Dr. Krista Soria, University of Idaho

Project Overview

This project examined institutional programs and practices that improve rural college students' educational outcomes and support their successful transitions into the workforce—an increasingly urgent concern amid persistent rural–urban inequities in higher education and labor markets. To address this gap, we developed the Assessing Rural Education Assets and Strengths (AREAS) survey, collected national data on rural and nonrural students' psychosocial, academic, and workforce-related outcomes, and disseminated findings through policy reports, peer-reviewed publications, and conference presentations. We also created a coalition of 14 rural-serving institutions, the Multi Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL), that participated in a national data collection and dissemination effort to better understand rural students.

Research Objectives Achieved

Above and beyond the effects of assets and structural barriers, we assessed the impact of institutional programs and practices on low-income rural college students':

1. Academic outcomes, such as retention and degree completion.
2. Psychosocial outcomes, such as sense of belonging, psychological well-being, and perceptions of campus climate.
3. Workforce-related outcomes, such as postgraduation employment, work capital, and perceived employability.

Research Methodology

The research team collected survey data from 9,634 college students at 1,432 colleges and universities in all 50 states. The survey included questions about students' assets, barriers, academic achievements, psychosocial well-being, participation in career development activities, and career-related outcomes. The team also analyzed data from existing national data sources to broaden understanding of the experiences and outcomes of rural college students and began collecting new data (via the MSL survey) in fall 2025.

Key Findings

- Rural students reported higher levels of loneliness and clinically significant symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder compared with nonrural students.
- Rural students experience more academic barriers, financial challenges (e.g., food/housing insecurity), and health-related obstacles than nonrural students.

- In high school, rural students were more likely than nonrural students to participate in paid employment, whether in areas related to their academic/career interests or in nonrelated areas.
- In college, nonrural students were more likely than rural students to complete paid/unpaid internships, career assessments, career guidance and counseling, job shadowing, and paid employment in areas related to their academic/career interests.
- Rural first-generation college students face challenges accessing paid internships, but those who do participate are more likely to be employed full time within 6 months of graduation and to report higher job satisfaction than those who do not participate in paid internships.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- Decrease structural barriers to rural college students' participation in career development activities.
- Establish or increase emergency grant programs for rural college students facing financial insecurity and provide or expand on-campus food banks or meal programs for those facing food insecurity.
- Develop or strengthen partnerships with local employers to create more paid internship opportunities for rural first-generation college students.
- To better support rural students with dependents, offer flexible course options (evenings, weekends, online) and provide affordable on-campus childcare options.

Resources

For more information on this project, please see:

- [AREAS survey instrument](#) and [conceptual framework](#)
- [Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership \(MSL\) Rural Coalition](#)
- [Economics of Career Development Decisions: Costs, Signals, and Geographic Heterogeneity](#) (2026)
- [Opportunity Gaps in Co-Curriculars at the Intersection of Geography and Parental Education: Implications for Students' Work Capital](#) (2026)
- [Obstacles and Opportunities in Rural College Students' Career Development](#) (2025)
- [Rural College Students' Loneliness](#) (2025)
- [Rural College Students' Experiences During the Pandemic: Implications for Academic Advisors](#) (2024)
- [Basic Needs Insecurity](#) (2024)
- [Career Services](#) (2024)
- [Demographics](#) (2024)
- [Family and Finances](#) (2024)
- [Paid Internships](#) (2024)
- [Rural College Students' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (2024)
- [Rural College Students' Experiences During the Pandemic: Implications for Academic Advisors](#) (2024)
- [Mentorship and Belonging Among Students of Color at Rural Colleges and Universities](#) (2023)