

Resources for Small-Town Counselors and Students



Plus tips to help colleges improve their outreach to rural students



CAUTION
SLOW DOWN



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Adam Sapp, assistant vice president of admissions at Pomona College (CA), grew up in a town with a population of 950 residents. He graduated with 47 other seniors and was one of only five in his class headed directly to a four-year college.

Sapp's experience mirrors that of thousands of other students nationwide, clearly demonstrating that we need to proactively pave the way for students from rural areas or small towns to access a college education.

"There were so many moments when being rural and a first-generation (student) created new hurdles to navigate," Sapp said, remembering the challenges he faced as a 17-year-old. "There was a secret language you had to speak in order to negotiate academic spaces."

In our role as counseling and admission professionals, we have a responsibility to develop and promote resources that help translate this language. One of the primary ways NACAC and its members support students from rural and small towns is through the Rural and Small Town Special Interest Group (SIG). SIGs are communities within NACAC composed of members with shared interest and knowledge.

In addition to the resources developed by NACAC and the Rural and Small Town SIG, here are some ideas that can serve as a springboard for counselors or students in rural communities.

RESOURCES FOR COUNSELORS

Counselor Fly-In Programs: Fly-in programs provide rural and small-town counselors the opportunity to visit colleges or universities at low- or no-cost. Though not all programs specifically identify as "rural-friendly," a number of deans and directors who were contacted by the *Journal* indicated that counselors who reach out to the sponsoring institution to explain their interest in providing access to rural students would be given additional consideration. (Read more about fly-ins on pages 38–42.)

Webinar or Skype Virtual Visits: Every dean, director, or vice-president we spoke to for this article indicated that, if given an invitation, they would support one of their professional staff members hosting an online information session for students in rural areas. This unanimous and resounding support reflected the dilemma many enrollment leaders in colleges are facing: with limited resources, it is difficult to invest in travel to rural high schools. Yet there is a strong commitment to increasing access for rural students. Colleges are eager to address this challenge through virtual visits or information sessions.

Inquiring as a Student: Since many colleges still don't have online information request forms for school counselors, one of the easiest ways to ensure you receive the most up-to-date materials and information is to inquire as a student through the college's website.

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

Travel Grants: Many institutions offer travel grants to admitted students to encourage them to visit campus. Though these grants often have parameters, we encourage students to ask about these kinds of programs. By reminding admission counselors of their personal circumstances, they may be awarded one even if they don't meet the established requirement.

Research Rural-Friendly Colleges: More and more colleges are identifying resources for students from rural areas and small towns. Through scholarships, resource pages on their websites, summer opportunities, and more, students can seek out institutions that have the expertise to support their transition. Colleges engaging in this work include Lycoming College (PA), Swarthmore College (PA), University of Georgia, Carleton College (MN), and others, but it is important for students to ask any college they are considering how the institution supports students from small towns or rural communities.


Virtual Interviews: If you are unable to travel to colleges you've applied to for an in-person interview, request a virtual interview. These interviews are typically added to your application record and give you an opportunity to share your story.

ADVICE FOR COLLEGE ADMISSION PROFESSIONALS

Even as we consider the resources students from rural areas need, we must also consider the strengths these students bring to our campuses. Sapp shared how his small school prepared him to persevere in college, stating that even though his high school "lacked the ability to deliver rigor, it made up for it by surrounding me with buckets of love and instilling within me in a high level of self-confidence and ability to persist."

Such stories remind us that, regardless of geography, all students are worthy of our best efforts to create access and opportunity.

And Sapp's personal and professional experiences give him significant insight into small changes colleges and universities can make to impact students from rural communities and small towns. Here's just one:

"Ask your communications office to tell the stories of those rural students you already have on your campus. Sure, I get why we all talk about who wins research grants and Fulbright scholarships and athletic championships, but let's not forget that our students also have stories. Making this invisible community visible through the power of videos, students blogs, viewbook and publications features, alumni magazine features, and more can promote inclusivity while at the same time signaling to rural high school students and counselors that your institution is a place that assigns value to that experience." 

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