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COMMENTARY

Lost Horizons

Making College a Reality for Rural Students

By Rick Dalton & John Mills

Thumb through *Architectural Digest's* annual "Country Homes" edition and you'll see a beautiful montage of bucolic getaways. From the Hollywood producer's Idaho ski chalet, to the billionaire CEO's Ralph Lauren-decorated Montana ranch, to the rustically genteel \$10 million lakeside mansion in the Adirondacks, the photos present a dreamlike image of life in rural America.

Look beyond those pages, however, and you'll see a very different reality for longtime residents of rural communities nationwide: persistent poverty, a lack of major employers and skilled workers, and a large population of underachieving high school students whose futures will be stunted because they won't go to college.

In fact, only 27 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds from rural areas enroll in college—a proportion far lower than for students from both urban and suburban communities. This is a problem that will become even more significant if current trends continue.

Enrollment in rural schools is up 15 percent in recent years and continues to increase. The trend is being driven by a tremendous rise in the number of minority and low-income students in rural areas. These are among the lowest-achieving high school students and the least likely to attend college. In fact, half of all students who are classified as English-language learners now live in rural areas.

As the president of a rural college, and the head of an organization that strives to boost college access and success for underserved students, we see this as a problem that calls for solutions specifically designed for rural communities. Some of these solutions are academic, but we must also do much more to boost aspirations. Like their urban counterparts, many rural students lack family members and role models who have been to college. Many come to believe at an early age that college is something that will take them

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"Like their urban counterparts, many rural students lack family members who have been to college. Many come to believe at an early age that college is something that will take them away from the communities where they feel safe and comfortable."

away from the communities where they feel safe and comfortable.

Many don't pursue higher education because they cannot fathom how to negotiate the admissions process.

After extensive discussions with rural college presidents, rural secondary school superintendents, legislators, and second-home owners, we have developed the following set of principles for establishing a path to improvement.

Promote rural high school rigor and readiness for the college experience. Currently, only 52 percent of rural secondary schools offer Advanced Placement courses, ranking them last when compared with suburban and urban schools. Rural precollegiate educators must make available more of these courses, as well as dual-enrollment and International Baccalaureate courses, to ensure that students are prepared to succeed at competitive colleges—and to send the message that college is a worthwhile destination.

Encourage entrepreneurial innovations. Like their urban counterparts, many rural school administrators face challenges in shaping academic and workforce training to meet the needs of their students and their communities. Rural communities that lack industry and major employers should embrace entrepreneurial endeavors and foster education and training to prepare students for them. In communities throughout the Adirondacks, the Appalachians, and other mountain regions, for example, there is a rich tradition of indigenous arts and craftsmanship. Schools in these areas should have more freedom to integrate technical and arts education into their curricula. This would enable more students to tap their individual aptitudes and develop skills that will translate directly to the world of work.

Promote mentoring initiatives. Remember those exciting stories your older brother and sister told you about life at college? One of the best ways to boost aspirations among high school students is to bring them face to face with students who are succeeding in higher education. Through a 17-year-old partnership that has involved 480 pre-K-12 schools and 280 colleges, thousands of elementary, middle, and secondary school students have received direct mentoring from older students who are succeeding in college. They spend time on college campuses, learn about the importance of taking challenging high school courses, and receive individual assistance in navigating the applications process from peers who promote the value of college firsthand.

This process has proved to be effective. To date, 96 percent of the secondary school students who have participated in the program have gone on to college—more than three times the rate for rural students overall.

Chart a clearer course through the college admissions and financial-aid process.

Once students aspire to attend college, they need direct assistance in negotiating how to get there. States with large rural populations and far-flung community schools should consider hiring roving counselors who could travel to schools throughout a region to hold information sessions about college and how to apply. Individual colleges and universities should likewise replicate the immense efforts they have made to connect with urban students to reach rural students.

Face-to-face conversations are key; while Web sites and brochures might outline the basics, the college-admissions process is a daunting journey filled with can't-miss deadlines and detours. Most young people need at least one personal advocate to guide their way.

Tap the talents and experiences of seasonal residents. In rural communities, second-home owners often are believed to be part of the problem when it comes to improving schools. Most of them don't have children in the local school system, and many are averse to paying higher taxes to support the schools. While there may be no easy fiscal solution, rural educators would benefit by finding ways to tap the knowledge of these newcomers to improve educational outcomes for their students.

Most of these seasonal residents are well-educated and economically secure, with life experiences that could influence the aspirations of others. Most of them moved to these communities by choice. They have a real love for the region and a keen interest in protecting their investment. Enhancing educational attainment in a community is one of the best ways to protect that investment and improve the quality of life for all.

Reverse the mind-set that going off to college means saying goodbye. Subconsciously or not, many rural families are less inclined to encourage higher education because they worry that when their children go, they're going for good. Efforts to promote the value of higher education should therefore include engagement with parents and other family members, who ultimately do want the best for their children.

We can also support these students and their families by improving the economic prospects of their communities. Rural enterprise zones, expanded broadband Internet access, and secondary school curricula that promote entrepreneurial learning will all attract investment and jobs to rural America. They will also give college graduates from rural communities an opportunity to inspire future generations by bringing their skills, knowledge, and aspirations back home.

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