In the following brief, Hanover Research reviews best practices in recruitment and enrollment strategies for rural prospective college students.
Colleges and universities regularly evaluate new and/or growing markets from which they can recruit prospective students. For some institutions this entails maximizing enrollment yield from rural markets, but strong execution in this area is challenging because the needs of rural prospective students can vary significantly from those of other student groups.

This research brief explores best practices in recruitment and enrollment strategies for rural prospective college students.

**KEY FINDINGS**

Recruitment strategies for rural students should focus on building personal relationships and building brand visibility through community events. Rural students often have low exposure to colleges and universities outside the region, and institutions that commit to participating in and offering local events (such as college planning sessions) can build a strong identity among rural students. In addition, rural students are more likely than their urban or suburban peers to value personal conversations and connections with admissions staff.

Rural students are particularly concerned about the financial aspects of attending a four-year college or university. A 2020 survey from Niche found that rural students were “more likely to apply for scholarships and receive financial aid...but were also more likely to be taking on a loan as well.” Institutions should introduce financial aid or work-study options early in the recruiting process and ensure financial information is accessible and understandable.

To build trust with rural communities, institutions should develop relationships beyond student recruitment, including responding to and engaging with local needs and concerns. Regularly attending and hosting community events and establishing extension offices in strategic areas (such as local schools and libraries) can be effective steps to develop these relationships. Current rural students also can be an invaluable resource via invitations to participate in recruiting days and/or speak to prospective students one-on-one.
RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

For rural students, overall recruitment trends focus on building personal relationships, responding to financial needs, and providing clear and accessible admissions information.

Notably, 2019 and 2020 surveys of high school seniors and admitted college students found that rural students are generally confident in- and satisfied with- the college search and application process. Despite reporting low access to high school counselors and concern about affordability, rural students reported fewer issues than their urban and suburban peers. This suggests that targeted recruitment strategies (such as increased personalized communication and visits and financial support) may be particularly successful in increasing rural student enrollment.

FINANCES

Rural students are particularly concerned about the financial aspects of attending a four-year college or university. A 2020 survey from Niche found that rural students were "more likely to apply for scholarships and receive financial aid...but were also more likely to be taking on a loan as well." In fact, only 30 percent of rural students felt confident they could afford the college they enrolled in for fall 2021. This can position rural students for higher stress levels and lower retention rates. Consequently, institutions should introduce financial aid or work-study options early in the recruiting process and ensure financial information is accessible and understandable.

RURAL STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

VARIATIONS IN RURALITY – Rural areas vary widely based on geographic, economic, and cultural characteristics. Institutions should identify a rural area’s local industries, major employers, and education availability in order to understand students’ exposure to higher education and career options.

LIMITED EXPOSURE TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS – Many rural students may only be familiar with a small handful of colleges and universities that are located nearby or that have been attended by family and friends. In addition, rural students may be first-generation college students and unfamiliar with college campuses and the college experience, including residence halls larger than their high school in some cases, public transportation, and communal dining.

LOW ACCESS TO HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS – School counselors in rural areas typically have outsized responsibilities, and may not be able to assist students with individual college searches. However, rural students typically place a high value on personal relationships with college admissions counselors. This suggests opportunities for admissions staff to build stronger relationships with rural students while supporting school counselors.

LIMITED TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE – Rural areas may not have reliable internet access or cell phone service. Consequently, institutions should not rely solely on virtual programming or communication to connect with rural students. For example, Rocky Mountain College in Montana focuses on physical print marketing (including in-depth financial aid literacy and affordability literature and printed admissions forms) and helps students fill out FAFSA applications over the telephone.
BEST PRACTICES IN RECRUITING RURAL STUDENTS

BEST PRACTICES

BUILD LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

To build trust with rural communities, institutions should develop relationships beyond student recruitment, including responding to and engaging with local needs and concerns. An admissions professional at Appalachian State University noted that developing rural admissions pipelines is a multi-year process that “may not yield results for the first three to five years.” Some strategies for investing in communities and establishing brand affinity include:

• Regularly attending and hosting community events
• Establishing extension offices in strategic areas. For example, the North Pennsylvania Regional College borrows space from local schools and libraries to run events and classes at six regional hubs around the state.
• Placing recruiters statewide. For example, the University of North Carolina – Charlotte increased its student pipeline by placing a regional recruiter across the state.

INVOLVE CURRENT STUDENTS

Current rural students can be an invaluable resource. Convene a focus group of current students to understand how to target recruitment efforts and how to update campus services. Invite current students to participate in recruiting days or speak to prospective students one-on-one. Local alumni can also support rural students through “applicant buddy” programs or meet-and-greet events.

FOCUS ON PERSONAL INTERACTIONS

A 2020 survey from Niche found that rural students preferred personal interactions more than their peers. Rural students prefer taking advice from people they know over online information, and their top choice for learning about a college without visiting was one-to-one communication with an admissions professional (while their peers said virtual events). Less than one third of rural students found virtual events to be important to their college search process, but 71 percent valued on campus visits.

MESSAGING

Marketing messaging should directly target rural students’ concerns and values. For example, some rural communities may be concerned about students not returning to the area after graduation. Producing admissions materials that demonstrate how students can apply their education in local communities can help allay these concerns.

In addition, because rural students may not have strong familiarity with distant colleges and universities, messaging should be thorough. However, four-year institutions marketing to rural students may have an advantage, both because there are fewer institutional competitors in rural areas and many markets have not been saturated with education-based advertising or marketing.
BEST PRACTICES IN RECRUITING RURAL STUDENTS

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT
Making College Connections

In Indiana, Purdue University (Purdue), Indiana University – Bloomington (IU), and the College Board partnered to offer the Making College Connections program, which extends SAT preparation and college planning services to students in rural high school. The program offers a college planning night to help students, parents, counselors, and students to set up online personalized SAT practice tools, learn about applications, and connect with admissions counselors from Purdue and IU. To further prioritize rural student recruiting, Purdue’s admissions staff visits all Indiana high schools (almost 400) at least every other year and visits most schools every year. A senior associate director of admissions at Purdue noted that these visits do not solve the problem on their own, but they are the “low-hanging fruit” of recruitment.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT
Carolina College Advising Corps

The University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill connects recent graduates to public high schools throughout the state to serve as college advisors. The College Advising Corps provides assistance to first-generation, low-income, and under-represented students with college and scholarship applications. Partner schools saw an “increase of 10-11 percent in college enrollment within the first year of partnership” and first year retention rates for students reached 74 percent (higher than the national average for low-income students).

PROFILE – IDAHO STATE UNIVERSITY

Administrators at Idaho State University (ISU) found that personal relationships were impactful and essential in recruiting regional rural students. The College of Arts and Letters also identified a number of ways in which faculty could contribute to recruitment efforts by building relationships between local high school students and instructors. Some of the recruitment initiatives included:

- **Liberal Arts High** - Faculty gave presentations on their areas of expertise to local high school classes and provided information about ISU, with multiple faculty visiting each year. In the first year of the program, faculty visited more than 5,000 students across 28 high schools.

- **Road Scholars Scholarship** – The College of Arts and Letters awarded $2,000 scholarships to qualified students in local high schools and the college dean presented these awards during school assemblies or classes in order to highlight the honor and build personal connections. Recipients were required to formally apply to ISU, which automatically enters students to be considered for additional financial support. Consequently, 14 Road Scholars ended up receiving a total of over $120,000 in awards to attend ISU. In addition, the “yield rate for these scholarship was 87 percent compared to the 43 percent yield rate for standard institutional scholarships.”

After these initiatives were implemented, the College of Arts and Letters saw an 11.7 percent increase in enrollments, along with a 75.8 percent increase in the number of students declaring a College of Arts and Letters major (between 2016 and 2017). In addition, the enrollment of students from the counties targeted by the College of Arts and Letters recruitment initiatives grew substantially: 44.3 percent, 90 percent, and 122.6 percent.