



TheRPGroup



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# Rural Matters:

Voices from the Field on Clearing  
the Path to a Bachelor's Degree for  
Rural Community College Students

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**Transfer Among  
Rural Learners**

TheRPGroup

[www.rpgroup.org](http://www.rpgroup.org)

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# Introduction

*The majority of community colleges located the furthest away were situated in rural regions of California...*

- Segovia & Cooper, 2024

Community colleges serve as the primary entry point to higher education for the majority of rural, low-income, and marginalized students, who often reside closer to a community college than to a university (Hillman & Weichman, 2016). For these learners, transferring from a community college to a four-year institution is a pivotal pathway to economic mobility and advancing income equality, as individuals with a bachelor's degree earn significantly more over their lifetimes than those without a bachelor's degree (Carnevale et al., 2013; 2017).

Our previous research confirmed that distance is a crucial factor affecting transfer. In our report, "[\*Distance Matters: Exploring Geographic Barriers to Transfer for California Community College Students\*](#)," we addressed the geographic barriers faced by California community college students when transferring to four-year institutions. We mapped "**university deserts**" – areas where students have severely limited proximate transfer options – in California and highlighted their impact on transfer rates. We found that **students attending a community college more than 25 miles from a public California university had lower transfer rates, and those attending a community college more than 80 miles away had even lower rates.** (See Figure 1).

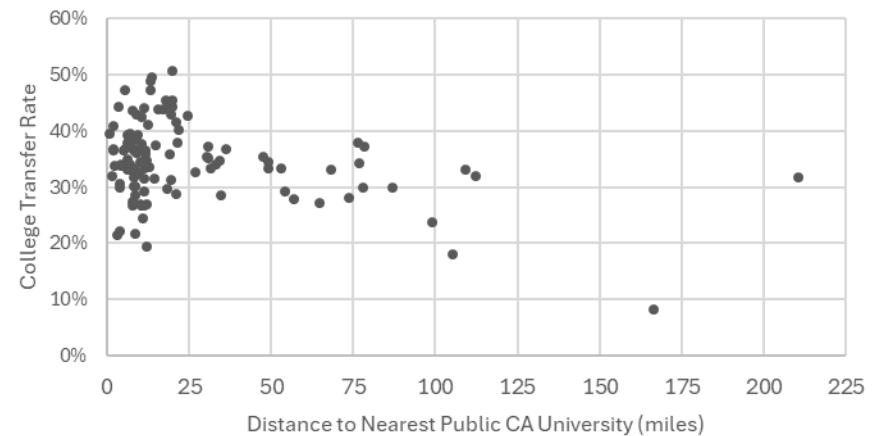
Interestingly, we observed that **the majority of community colleges located the furthest away were situated in rural regions** of California. These colleges were also more likely to serve Latine, low-income, and first-generation college students (Segovia

& Cooper, 2024). This finding aligns with other research, for example, showing that 60% of community colleges with the lowest transfer rates are located in rural areas (CalMatters, 2025).

**FIGURE 1**

**Transfer Rate Decline Correlates with Distance: Marked Reductions Observed at 25 and 80 Miles**

*Scatterplot showing the relationship between college transfer rates and distance from the nearest UC or CSU*





Rural areas in California are vast, varied, and distinct from the state's large urban centers. These rural regions are generally located in the mountains, forests, deserts, and the far northern and central regions, including the highly agricultural Central Valley. Rural California community colleges play a vital role in their communities, serving as economic engines by providing job training and education to students. These colleges serve large geographic regions, often spanning 8,000 square miles (Cerro Coso College) to 10,000 square miles (Shasta College), with multiple physical sites and limited transportation infrastructure.

<sup>1</sup> We included rural colleges regardless of university desert attribution because we wanted to focus on the effect of rurality on transfer. As a result, two non-desert colleges (Madera College and College of the Redwoods) were included in the sample.

<sup>2</sup> See the [NCES locale definitions](#).

Students are frequently “**place-bound**” due to family obligations, full-time employment, or lack of access to nearby universities. For some rural students, driving to a university is feasible, but for others, the commute remains a major obstacle that is costly, time-consuming, and potentially hazardous in inclement weather.

Given these obstacles, our current research aims to deepen understanding of the experiences of students and practitioners at rural community colleges in university deserts. The goal is to generate actionable, evidence-based recommendations that will enhance transfer equity for this critical student population.

## Participating Colleges

For this study, we contacted 21 community colleges located in rural regions or serving a significant number of rural students<sup>1</sup>. Rurality was determined by using IPEDS urbanicity categorizations<sup>2</sup> or a Rural-Serving Institution (RSI)<sup>3</sup> score of 1.175 or higher. Ultimately, 15 colleges agreed to participate,<sup>4</sup> yielding a 71% response rate. The map on the next page shows the locations of participating colleges (Figure 2), and Table 1 on page 7 lists their corresponding geographic information.

<sup>3</sup> See the [Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges](#) for additional information.

<sup>4</sup> For additional details on the methodology for this study, please see the [Methodology](#) document.

Thirty practitioners—most commonly counselors, deans, transfer center directors, institutional researchers, and vice presidents—were asked about their colleges’ transfer culture, design, resources, and partnerships, as well as the barriers to transfer posed by distance and other obstacles, as well as the possible solutions to these challenges.

Focus groups with 62 students from 10 colleges explored students' perspectives on transfer culture, transfer resources and services, factors related to transfer success (e.g., university affordability, pathway navigation, school-life balance, and support networks), and the roles of distance, social influence, and community ties in their transfer decisions.

Both sets of conversations identified key themes and practical solutions related to and influencing successful transfer from community colleges to universities when the institutions are a significant distance apart.

## In This Report

This report summarizes the factors and trends affecting transfer for students at rural California community colleges. The insights were gathered from interviews and focus groups with practitioners and students. The report first lists the colleges participating in the study, then details two key factors affecting rural transfer, and concludes with recommendations for college

staff, policymakers, and university partners to boost transfer rates in these regions.

### FIGURE 2

#### Participating Rural Colleges Were in the North/Far North, Central Mother Lode, Inland Empire/Desert, and San Diego/Imperial Regions

*California map of colleges participating in this study*



**TABLE 1****List of Participating Rural Colleges**

<b>Participating College</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>Macroregion</b>	<b>Geographical Setting</b>	<b>Distance – Closest UC or CSU<sup>5</sup></b>
Barstow Community College	San Bernardino	Inland Empire/Desert	High Desert	68 miles – CSU San Bernardino
Cerro Coso Community College	Kern	Central/Mother Lode	High Desert, Mountains	109 miles – CSU San Bernardino
Coalinga College	Fresno	Central/Mother Lode	Agricultural	76 miles – CSU Fresno
College of the Redwoods	Humboldt	North/Far North	Forest	8 miles – CSU Humboldt
College of the Siskiyous	Siskiyou	North/Far North	Mountain	211 miles – CSU Humboldt
Columbia College	Tuolumne	Central/Mother Lode	Forest, Mountain	57 miles – CSU Stanislaus
Copper Mountain College	San Bernardino	Inland Empire/Desert	High Desert	78 miles – UC Riverside
Feather River College	Plumas	North/Far North	Forest, Mountain	87 miles – CSU Chico
Imperial Valley College	Imperial	San Diego/Imperial	Desert, Agricultural	112 miles – CSU San Diego
Lake Tahoe Community College	El Dorado	North Far North	Mountain	99 miles – CSU Sacramento
Lassen Community College	Lassen	North/Far North	High Desert, Mountains	105 miles – CSU Chico
Madera Community College	Madera	Central/Mother Lode	Agricultural	20 miles – CSU Fresno
Palo Verde College	Riverside	Inland Empire/Desert	Desert	166 miles – UC Riverside
Porterville College	Tulare	Central/Mother Lode	Mountain	53 miles – CSU Bakersfield
Shasta College	Shasta	North/Far North	Mountain	77 miles – CSU Chico

<sup>5</sup> University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU)



# Distance Equals...

*"Distance is the key. Everything is harder because of distance. [The students] haven't seen the [university], they don't know what to expect, they have to leave home, they have to get an apartment. All that is distance."*

- College Practitioner

Based on the project's findings, several factors emerged that affect students attending rural community colleges' ability to transfer to a four-year university. While these factors can affect any community college student, **distance often exacerbates their impact** on rural students and colleges, as they are farther from universities. This physical distance often creates significant challenges for these communities.

In the upcoming sections, we will examine **two major factors — money and connections** — that influence rural colleges and their students and explore how they navigate these obstacles. Each factor is analyzed in two parts: its effect on the student experience and its subsequent impact on the institution. These sections are supplemented with relevant perspectives from both students and college practitioners.

## 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 following section explains how the "Distance Equals Money" concept shapes the transfer pathway for rural students.

### The Student "Distance Penalty"

**Rural students face higher transportation, housing, and opportunity costs to access transfer institutions.**

Consequently, financial concerns were the most powerful and consistent factor influencing students' transfer decisions. As one student plainly stated when asked about the impact of distance: *"That is a silly question, because **distance equals money.**"*

The cost of distance has a direct impact on students; relocating to a university often means incurring higher living expenses—especially for housing—and leaving behind family or a steady job. For many students, this "distance penalty" is often enough to deter them from transferring to a university altogether. The financial burden of attending a university led students to prioritize tuition costs, financial aid availability, and proximity to home when choosing their colleges.

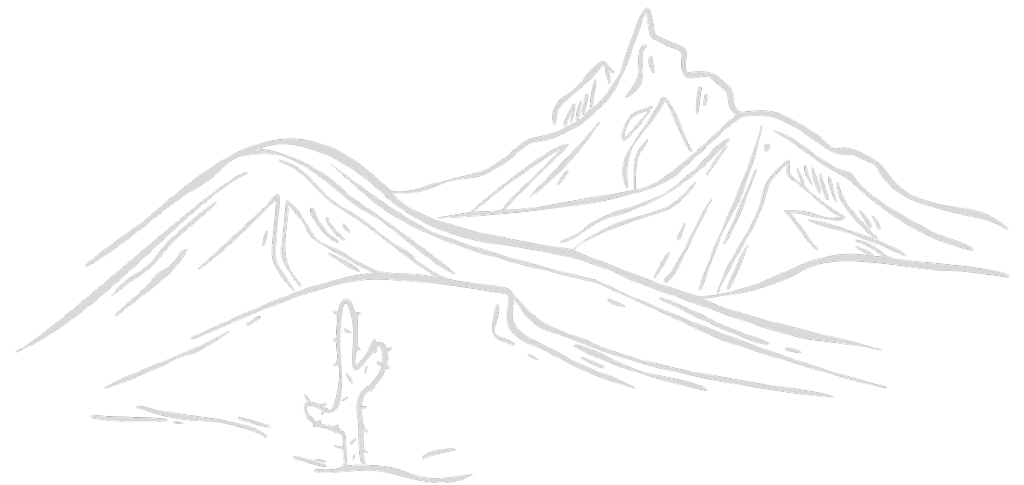
When discussing possible solutions, many students specifically expressed a desire for bachelor's degree options that would allow them to stay close to home and minimize expenses. For students juggling lower incomes, limited savings, and responsibilities such as caregiving or work, **cost-saving measures were essential.** Students mentioned the following opportunities as having helped them reduce their cost of attendance:

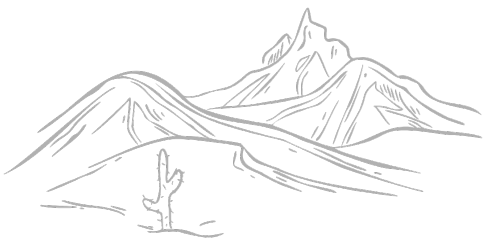
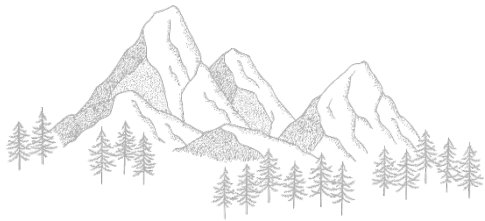
- ❖ **Tuition reciprocity programs**, such as the Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE), that offer in-state tuition to California community college students.
- ❖ **Open Educational Resources** (OER), which help students find courses that offer free or reduced-cost textbooks.
- ❖ Coordination between community colleges and university partners that provides continuity and clear guidance to help students avoid course redundancy, which ultimately saves them time and money.

Recognizing student financial concerns, community college practitioners are increasingly **integrating financial literacy and planning into the transfer preparation process**. Colleges offer workshops to help students interpret financial aid award letters, apply for grants (e.g., [Pell](#) and [Cal](#) Grants) and scholarships, and

navigate housing options—a critical yet often overlooked barrier. Tools such as [CSU affordability calculators](#) and online education planning platforms (e.g., [ASSIST.org](#), [transferbound.com](#), and [CalGETC/IGETC](#)) further help students compare university costs and map financially efficient academic pathways.

Students and administrators also discussed the potential of expanding online degree programs and related support to better serve diverse learners. However, **the small size of many rural colleges complicates online expansion, often resulting in limited course availability**. Solutions, such as the [California Virtual College–Online Education Initiative](#), exist to address limited course offerings at rural colleges.





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

“[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

“It just wasn't affordable for me. Honestly, I don't have the luxury of being able to go out of state or support myself while attending college anywhere else besides being here locally. ”

- Transferred Student

“... 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

“[Students expressed that]...with the distance, it also just feels far away... It's so expensive. So many students are just poor and can't afford that. Everything outside of us is a big city and... [they] can't afford that. How would [they] ever afford that?”

- College Practitioner

## The Institutional Cost Multiplier

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.

Rural colleges face a dual challenge: they are held to identical performance standards as urban institutions but operate with significantly smaller budgets due to enrollment-based funding models. This resource disparity pushes rural administrators to innovate by necessity, creatively restructuring spending, redistributing resources, and consolidating staff roles to maintain service levels.

Current funding formulas rely on the “fallacy of uniform conditions,” a **one-size-fits-all approach that systematically penalizes rural institutions**. Practitioners specifically cite policies such as the [50% Law](#) as a major barrier to budget flexibility. By mandating that half of the educational budget be restricted to classroom instruction, the law disproportionately squeezes funding for non-instructional support. The result is chronic underinvestment in essential student services, such as transfer counseling, forcing rural staff to pool categorical monies, restructure positions to enable staff to fulfill dual roles (such as serving as both general counselors and transfer coordinators), and seek funding sources outside their regions, such as competitive federal grants (e.g., TRIO) or private foundation support.

Transfer initiatives at rural colleges heavily rely on piecing together categorical and supplemental funding sources, including the [Student Equity and Achievement Program](#) (SEAP), the [TRIO](#) program, the [Strong Workforce Program](#), and [Hispanic-Serving Institutions grants](#). College practitioners noted that these funding streams are crucial for sustaining transfer services, support staff, professional development, campus visits, and targeted programming for underrepresented groups, including adult learners, first-generation students, and students with disabilities. Even with dedicated programs such as [Extended Opportunity Programs and Services](#) (EOPS), [Disabled Student Programs and Services](#) (DSPS), [Umoja](#), [MESA](#), and TRIO, rural colleges often must creatively pool resources to sustain transfer-related activities.

Additionally, several colleges emphasized **the importance of fostering a transfer culture on campus**—an environment where transitioning to a four-year university is a visible, expected, and actively supported goal—but **such efforts can be constrained by funding**. Colleges actively promote transfer culture through diverse initiatives. Cerro Coso, Coalinga, Columbia, and Palo Verde host dedicated transfer fairs and application workshops. Porterville College boosts visibility through “Transfer Thursdays,” with staff wearing alumni gear to spark organic conversations. Finally, Copper Mountain, Madera, and Lake Tahoe honor successful transfers by hosting campus-wide celebration events.

Despite these efforts, administrators emphasized that **staffing levels still fall short**, especially for tasks such as coordinating university campus visits or providing consistent one-on-one support throughout the transfer process. Many rural colleges are **maximizing their resources through interdepartmental collaboration, combining revenue and funding streams, and strategic hiring practices**. For example, financial aid and counseling might collaborate on application and award workshops, while Transfer Centers partner with Umoja or TRIO to fund college tours. Institutional research offices will provide data to counselors to help target and refine transfer services.

Institutions frequently combine revenue and funding streams by leveraging SEAP and categorical funds (such as EOPS, DSPS, Puente, and Umoja) to bridge gaps in service.

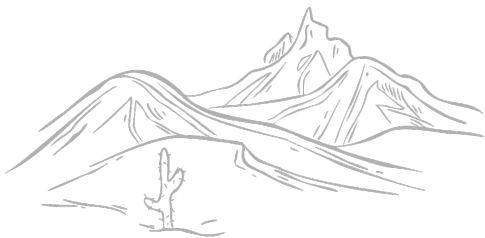
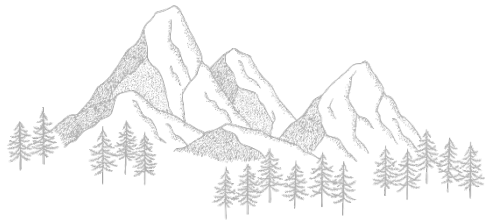
**Moreover, some colleges actively seek funding and support outside of their regions to assist all transfer students.** For example, student athletes at some colleges were highlighted as a key group supporting both institutional enrollment and transfer goals. Often recruited from outside the region, student-athletes must enroll full-time to meet eligibility requirements, which helps colleges fill general education courses that are more affordable to offer than Career Technical Education programs.

Table 2 highlights a sample of programs identified by college practitioners as especially impactful for transfer efforts.

**TABLE 2**

*A sample of programs positively impacting transfer*

<b>Program and Description</b>	<b>Impact</b>
<u><a href="#">TRIO Student Support Services Program</a></u> - Awarded through a competitive federal process, this program aims to enhance retention and completion rates by providing academic tutoring, course advisement, and dedicated financial aid support.	TRIO funding has allowed colleges to expand counseling and transfer services for several marginalized student groups. Since TRIO funds are not counted under the 50% Law, they can also support counseling staff, college visits, and transfer fairs.
<u><a href="#">BOLD (Bachelor's through Online and Local Degrees) at Shasta College</a></u> Launched to serve adult learners who are unable to relocate for a university education.	Acting as an Online Transfer Center, BOLD pairs students with counselors to identify high-quality online degree options. The program focuses exclusively on accredited, non-profit partners that offer strong credit transferability and affordability.
<u><a href="#">Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE)</a></u> - The WUE Discount caps tuition at 150% of the resident rate for students from several states and US territories, including California.	The WUE has become a critical "pressure valve" for California's impacted higher education systems, alleviating enrollment congestion at public universities. California students have experienced significant tuition savings, averaging \$50,000 over four years compared to regular out-of-state tuition.



**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 think we need more inventive ways to think about how we can get our students to see themselves as university students.”

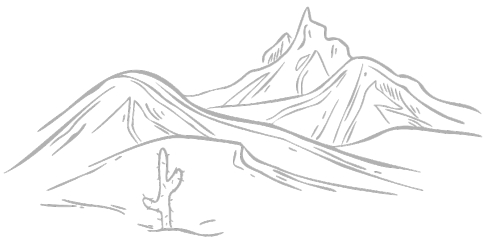
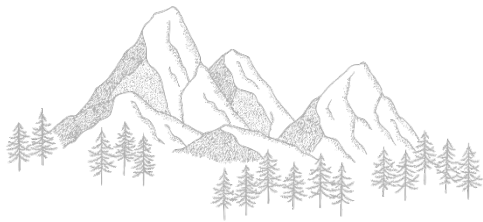
- College Practitioner

“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

“I would say that our highest transfer area is definitely our athletes. We’re a small institution. Athletes are everything to us. They fill up our dorm, they...eat in our cafeteria, they contribute across campus, they aid FTES [full-time equivalent students] everywhere.”

- College Practitioner



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

“...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

“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. We have lamented and, quite honestly, really even cried about the idea that we really should have more to give to transfer. And we know we are neglecting it. I think that’s pretty universally agreed on.”

- 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. The following section offers highlights on how connections, in all their forms, influence transfer for rural students.

## Social Capital Is Critical to Student Transfer

**In rural areas, students' transfer decisions are often shaped by strong community ties and severe transportation limitations.**

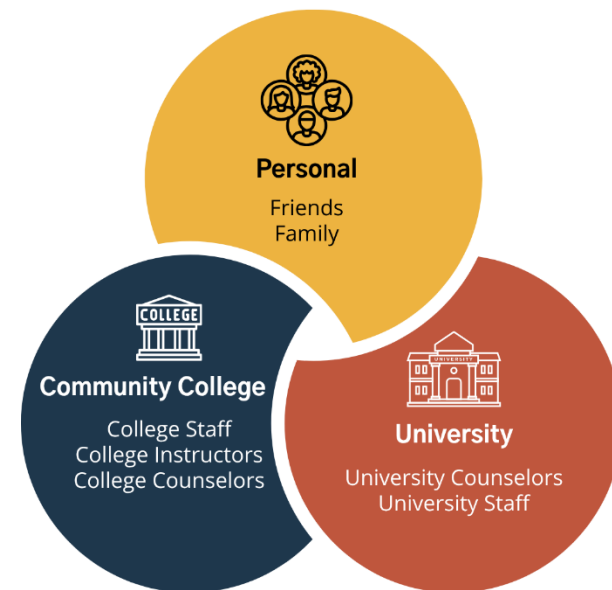
Students frequently face intense pressure to remain close to home, balancing work and family responsibilities against their academic ambitions. Personal connections are not a luxury; they are a critical necessity. For students, this social capital—defined as the vital resources, information, and support accessed through interpersonal networks—is the direct driver of their persistence and success. Networks of peers, family support, community ties, and institutional personnel dictate transfer success by equipping students with the 'navigational know-how' required to decode complex academic requirements, overcome bureaucratic hurdles, and secure a sense of belonging at a new institution.

These support networks span three critical dimensions: **personal** ties with friends and family; **community college**-based relationships with instructors and counselors; and external connections with **university** representatives (see Figure 3). Students leveraging their social capital reported a smoother transfer experience, specifically citing the help they received with navigating relocation, decoding academic requirements, and adjusting to university life.

**FIGURE 3**

**Social capital—networks of friends, family, and institutional personnel—is critical to a student's ability to transfer**

*Diagram of students' social capital networks*



**Transferring often necessitates a profound shift from close-knit rural communities to vast urban campuses**, precipitating significant culture shock. The sheer scale of city-based universities—compounded by a faster pace, possibly unfamiliar social norms, and divergent cultural perspectives—creates distinct academic and social adjustment challenges for students. Rural students frequently reported feelings of anonymity and isolation, struggling to build meaningful connections or navigate impersonal, bureaucratic systems that contrast sharply with the intimate environments they left behind. Consequently, **social capital drives transfer destination choices**; students prioritize institutions where established peer networks can provide a sense of safety and belonging, balancing their desire for independence with a need for connection.

Students emphasized the importance of relational support within smaller college communities, where there was “always someone to talk to.” **Counseling faculty and athletic coaches played pivotal roles**, not only in academic preparation but also in building students’ motivation and confidence. Faculty played a significant role in advising students within specific majors, promoting transfer

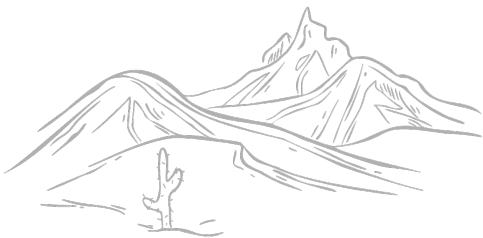
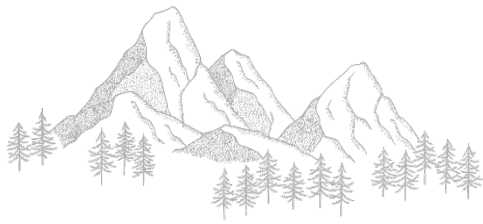
events, and encouraging strategic course planning—such as taking winter or summer sessions to stay on track. Faculty’s announcements and personal outreach to students were particularly effective in driving engagement. Students consistently praised faculty for their care, responsiveness, and ability to create a sense of community, even in online learning environments.

Students also highlighted several elements of college-university partnerships that positively impacted their transfer journeys. **Proactive outreach by university partners** and transfer pathway planning tools (e.g., [ASSIST.org](https://assist.org), [transferbound.com](https://transferbound.com), and [CalGETC/IGETC](https://calgetc.org) requirements), campus visits, and transfer fairs were particularly impactful, especially when students were allowed to attend with a friend or family member. **Co-located or deeply integrated university support**—such as shared counselors between community colleges and their partner universities—provided continuity and clearer guidance. Similarly, **tuition reciprocity agreements**<sup>6</sup> made out-of-state options more accessible to students.

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<sup>6</sup> Tuition reciprocity agreements are partnerships between states, regions, or individual colleges that allow students to attend an out-of-state university at

a reduced tuition rate—often significantly lower than the standard non-resident price.



**Students frequently face intense pressure to remain close to home, balancing work and family responsibilities against their academic ambitions.**

“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 support network is one of the most important ones. 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

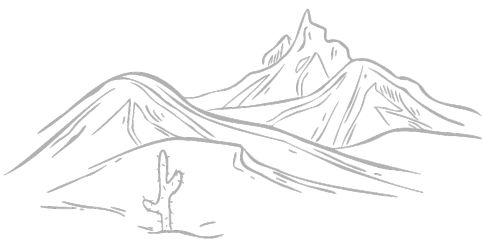
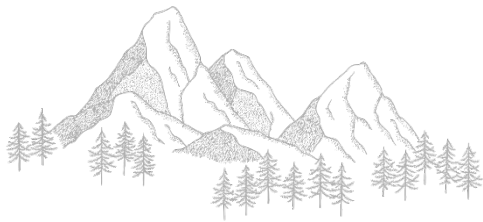
## Institutional Strategic Partnerships as the Engine for Innovation

**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.**

**When distance is a barrier, clear and accessible academic and support pathways are even more critical.** Institutions intentionally designed these support structures to advance students' transfer goals, foster a sense of belonging, and build a robust transfer culture. Practitioners at these rural colleges described implementing strategies such as creating fully online transfer pathways and establishing affordable interstate tuition exchanges led by university partners. For example, [Arizona State University](#), [Southern Utah University](#), [Western Governors University](#), and the [Western Undergraduate Exchange](#) program were mentioned in the interviews as key university partners that offer reduced or no tuition, and, in some cases, room and board to California's transfer students. College practitioners stated that these cross-institutional collaborations are essential to transforming transfer from a challenging hurdle into a transparent, equitable, and efficient systemic process.

Practitioners emphasized that **partnering with transfer institutions was crucial** to ensuring that students completed the correct courses and were linked to the necessary resources upon arrival at the university. These partnerships provided students with a familiar contact ("a name and a face") to help smooth their transfer journey. A key structural component of these partnerships is articulation agreements, such as the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT), which guarantees admission to a CSU and helps promote transfer readiness and a seamless transition. Furthermore, some interviewees described using advisory committees composed of secondary and postsecondary partners to build relationships and jointly design seamless educational pathways across institutions.

Although college-university partnerships are not unique to rural areas, the absence of a local four-year institution requires rural community colleges to proactively maintain multiple, dispersed partnerships. This results in significantly increased staff time, effort, and expense. Furthermore, the sheer distance makes it exceptionally difficult to convince university representatives to travel to rural campuses, severely limiting in-person support and collaborative opportunities.



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

“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

“We're trying to do at least...a quarterly [advisory committee] meeting... so that we can better communicate to our students about what transfer looks like and what is needed to go into that 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



# Recommendations

*Strategies must reflect the lived realities of rural communities...*

- The RP Group

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. This research shows that rural student transfer outcomes are shaped by geography rather than motivation or ability. Distance and isolation compound barriers at every stage of the transfer pathway—limiting access to courses, advising, articulation, campus visits, internships, and university engagement.

Our first report, *[Distance Matters: Exploring Geographic Barriers to Transfer for California Community College Students](#)*, listed possible solutions to increase access to transfer for all students facing geographic barriers. However, for rural learners, **strategies must reflect the lived realities of rural communities**, including limited support networks, lower college-going traditions, economic pressures, and the steep costs of relocation. Policies that treat rural and urban colleges as monolithic ignore these logistical realities, ultimately deepening equity disparities.

Rural community colleges and their students continue to **demonstrate resilience and innovation through online pathways, expanded advising networks, and cross-sector partnerships**. Closing equity gaps in transfer rates will require sustained commitment at both the institutional and systemic levels. By addressing the barriers outlined in this report, California can move closer to ensuring that students in every community—

regardless of their geographic location—have genuine and equitable access to transfer opportunities.

Improving baccalaureate degree completion for rural students requires addressing systemic barriers rooted in geography, affordability, and policy. Based on insights from both practitioners and students, **three key recommendations emerged for university partners and policymakers** to help rural colleges increase their transfer outcomes:

1. Support Building a Stronger Transfer and Degree-Completion Culture
2. Expand Place-Based Baccalaureate Options
3. Address Policy and Practices

These recommendations are further expanded in the following pages.

# Recommendation 1

## Support Building a Stronger Transfer and Degree-Completion Culture

Students and personnel from this study expressed that cultivating a “transfer-going mindset” was integral to getting students to want to and believe that they could transfer. However, intentional design is necessary to support students' transfer goals and sense of belonging and build transfer culture at the institution.

Therefore, four-year **universities and policymakers must actively support the creation of a "transfer-going mindset" within rural regions** by funding and facilitating the social and financial infrastructures that counter geographic isolation. To institutionalize this mindset, we recommend:

- ❖ **Universities expand tuition reciprocity agreements and partner directly with rural colleges** on high-visibility initiatives, such as "Transfer Thursdays" and alumni-led peer mentorship programs, to create clear, visual pathways for aspiring transfer students.
- ❖ **Policymakers and system leaders allocate dedicated funding to rural colleges** to sustain high-impact interventions—such as emergency aid, financial literacy workshops, and cohort-based programs—that make transfer feel viable and affordable.

- ❖ **System leaders adjust funding formulas to account for the "rural penalty."** Standard transfer activities, such as university visits, are significantly costlier in rural university deserts due to geographic isolation; thus, specific considerations in funding formulas are required to ensure rural students have equitable access to these indispensable exposure opportunities.

# Recommendation 2

## Expand Place-Based Baccalaureate Options

As previously stated, education must be accessible to all students, regardless of their location. **We must focus on bringing educational opportunities to students**, rather than expecting them to travel long distances or uproot their lives to earn their bachelor's degrees. Rural students are often place-bound due to family obligations and/or employment, making relocation unfeasible.

**Policymakers** can make higher education more accessible to rural students by **expanding [community college baccalaureate programs](#)** and advocating for more **partnerships between community colleges and CSU and UC campuses**, as well as not-for-profit universities, to **increase degree-completion options**

for rural students. Policymakers can also consider developing dual-admission or co-location models that bring upper-division coursework directly to rural campuses.

## Recommendation 3

### Address Policy and Practice Gaps That Disproportionately Affect Rural Areas

Current flat or formula-based funding models operate on the fallacy of uniform conditions and, consequently, systematically disadvantage rural colleges. Systemic policy reforms are essential for supporting degree completion and fostering a robust transfer culture at rural colleges. **True equity requires funding to be calibrated to the cost of delivery and need, not to identical allocations.**

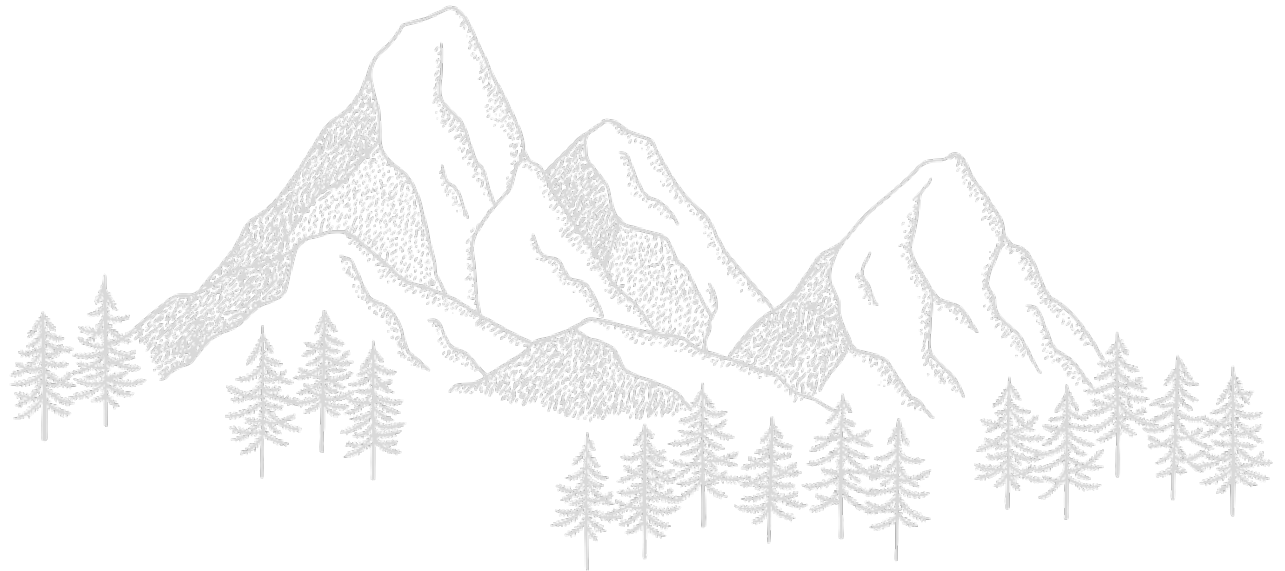
Current funding structures inadvertently impose a “rural penalty” on geographically isolated institutions. For instance, the 50% Law, which mandates that districts spend at least half of their educational expenses on classroom instruction, severely limits small, rural colleges' ability to adequately fund critical student support services, such as transfer counseling and academic advising. **Policymakers** should consider amending this law to **broaden the definition of "instructional" costs or expand exemptions**, which would greatly benefit these institutions.

Beyond this, other foundational state funding models—most notably the Student-Centered Funding Formula (SCFF)—must be adjusted to reflect the true costs of delivering education and student support in rural regions, rather than relying on urban-centric baselines.

Furthermore, **expanding course availability is a critical step** toward reducing duplication and confusion in the coursework that students need to complete to transfer. As students and practitioners noted, clear and accessible academic support is critical when distance is a barrier, because rural students rely entirely on local college personnel to decode complex articulation agreements without the safety net of a nearby university. Policymakers and practitioners at the community college and university levels can increase the availability of coursework for students who are place-bound by expanding programs that enhance access to essential coursework. For instance, the expansion of online options within the California State University (CSU) system has proven effective in increasing student access to essential baccalaureate-level coursework. On the community college side, successful efforts such as the [California Virtual College-Online Education Initiative](#) (CVC-OEI) can be further expanded by the Chancellor's Office and participating colleges with a focus on reaching rural students who need to remain local.

Finally, **intersegmental requirements must be streamlined by CSU and UC partners to address the current inconsistency**

where various universities within the same system require different courses and GPA thresholds for the exact same majors. This alignment can be achieved through standardized prerequisites or by offering dual-admission programs (e.g., the CSU [Transfer Success Pathway](#)). These programs increase access to public universities for high school graduates entering a California Community College who wish to secure a guaranteed spot at a specific university in the future.





# Conclusion & Next Steps

*Data are intended to **inform practical strategies** for rural institutions, the California Community College Chancellor's Office, the UC and CSU systems, and the state legislature.*

- The RP Group

These interviews and focus groups provided critical insights into the lived reality of the rural transfer experience. Our findings confirm that geographic isolation acts as a barrier multiplier, exacerbating financial strain and hindering the development of the vital social connections that facilitate student success. Addressing these financial and relational deficits requires policy and programming that explicitly acknowledge—and fund—the unique logistical realities of rural education.

Although these qualitative findings provide a critical foundation, they are constrained by a condensed timeframe and a sample limited to institutions with the immediate capacity to participate. Furthermore, this initial phase did not capture granular data regarding student demographics, specific transfer goals, or long-term career aspirations. Consequently, broader comparative research is required to isolate the barriers unique to the rural experience from those shared by urban counterparts.

To expand this evidentiary base, the next phase of our research will deploy a **statewide quantitative survey targeting a diverse cross-section of students across rural, suburban, and urban locales**. This approach will allow us to disaggregate the data and clearly distinguish universal transfer challenges from those distinctly tied to geographic isolation and university deserts.

Ultimately, this expanded dataset is designed to yield actionable recommendations for rural institutions, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), the UC and CSU systems,

and the state legislature. By generating evidence-based strategies to support ongoing efforts—such as the Vision 2030 rural initiative—our overarching goal is to **ensure equitable transfer outcomes for all California students, regardless of their zip code**.



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## About The RP Group

The RP Group is a leader that supports equitable outcomes for minoritized and marginalized students through race-conscious, equity-minded research, planning, and professional development. We uplift student voices and empower researchers and planners to improve institutional effectiveness by dismantling systemic barriers and injustices.

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