



## Bridging the College Gap for America's Growing Rural Latino/a/x Population

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Rural communities are at a turning point. Across the U.S., rural areas face lower educational attainment and economic opportunity than urban areas. According to recent estimates from the American Community Survey, the share of adults ages 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher is **21% in rural areas** compared to 36% in urban areas. With about **one in five** U.S. residents living in rural areas, a persisting and widening gap in educational attainment between rural and urban areas is of utmost concern to rural people, communities, regions, and legislators.

Within this broader picture, rural Latino/a/x communities play an increasingly central role in shaping the future. As one of the **fastest-growing populations** in rural America, Latino/a/x residents are contributing to significant population growth, supporting local economies, and increasing civic participation. Still, they face some of the steepest barriers to higher education: over a third lack a high school diploma, and **only 11%** have earned a bachelor's degree or higher.

Without federal action, barriers to higher education and vicious cycles of poverty will persist, limiting the potential of Latino/a/x students and the future of rural communities alike.

### Why Do Rural Latinos/as/xs and Their Educational Attainment Matter?

- **Population Growth.** Latinos/as/xs represent the largest share of minoritized groups in rural America, with a population of **4.1 million**. While rural Latinos/as/xs have historically been concentrated in the U.S. Southwest, regions such as the **Midwest and South** are beginning to see large Latino/a/x populations.
- **Voter Base.** Latinos/as/xs across geographic backgrounds are already the **largest racial/ethnic minoritized voting group** in the U.S., and their growing presence in rural America represents an emerging political force that cannot be ignored. **14%** of the rural Latino/a/x population is under 18. These young people will soon become eligible to vote, providing a future voter base for political leaders. Increasing their educational attainment is vital, given that college graduates are more likely to vote and participate in civic life.
- **Economic Contributions.** Rural Latinos/as/xs have already been identified as an **"economic lifeline"** to rural areas, filling critical jobs in agriculture, manufacturing, and construction. U.S. Latinos/as/xs, in general, have the fastest-growing **GDP** among the world's top 10 economies and are the most **entrepreneurial** out of any racial/ethnic group. Increasing the educational attainment of rural Latinos/as/xs will further ensure the economic well-being, vitality, and success of rural areas and the overall U.S. economy.

### Barriers Rural Latino/a/x Students Face in Pursuit of Higher Education

- **Poverty.** Latinos/as/xs experience **higher poverty rates** in rural areas than in urban areas and are disproportionately concentrated in labor-intensive and **low-wage** industries.
- **Academic Underpreparation.** Rural Latino/a/x students experience academic underpreparation for college, often attending K-12 schools and districts with less funding. A lack of funding results in fewer resources, such as fewer college prep **courses** and guidance **counselors** to provide necessary academic support and advising.
- **Geographic Isolation.** Rural Latino/a/x students experience significant geographic isolation, traveling further distances to pursue higher education because they live in “**education deserts.**” This isolation creates additional barriers associated with transportation logistics and costs. It also means that college recruiters **do not visit** rural schools. This lack of intentional outreach limits rural students’ access to vital college information and contributes to estrangement between higher education institutions and college personnel, conflicting with the tight-knit cultures of rural communities and the desires of rural Latino/a/x students to attend **familiar institutions.**

## **Actions Federal Policymakers Must Take to Reduce Barriers to Higher Education for Rural Latinos/as/xs**

- **Increase Financial Aid.** Increasing financial aid can mitigate the adverse effects of systemic poverty and added transportation costs incurred by rural Latino/a/x students. Bills like the **Pell Grant Preservation and Expansion Act of 2024** and the **Degrees Not Debt Act of 2024** aim to increase the maximum Pell Grant award and adjust it annually to keep pace with inflation, thereby reducing the financial burden on low-income rural Latino/a/x youth who seek to access and complete higher education.
- **Invest in College Preparation.** Rural Latino/a/x students can benefit from increased college preparation. Bills like the **Fast Track To and Through College Act** consider how Pell Grant awards can be used to provide high school students with opportunities to take college courses for credit through dual enrollment programs, enhancing the academic preparation of rural Latino/a/x students whose schools may lack access to rigorous college preparatory coursework. Using this aid to pay for college classes will also reduce students' future college costs and duration and increase their college completion rates by allowing them to make significant progress toward their undergraduate degrees early on.
- **Strengthen College Outreach Programs.** Targeted outreach from higher education institutions can help create a college-going culture in rural Latino/a/x students’ schools and communities. Rural Latino/a/x students, in particular, benefit from participation in federally funded **TRIO programs** like Upward Bound, as they provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with college information, exposure, assistance in completing college applications, college tours, summer programs, and more. TRIO programs should not be cut as part of the 2026 fiscal budget but preserved and strengthened.
- **Expand Internet Access.** Increasing internet access in rural areas could connect rural Latino/a/x students to vital college-related resources and reduce the **digital divide.** In the current information age, internet access means access to search engines, social media platforms, and virtual college tours. The **Affordable Connectivity Program**, which provided low-income households with discounted internet service but ended in 2024, must be reinstated to connect geographically isolated rural Latino/a/x youth to online college information and resources that may be absent in their schools and communities.

Demographic shifts across the nation, including rural America, necessitate that barriers to higher education for rural Latino/a/x youth be eliminated. Rural Latino/a/x students are future voters, consumers, business owners, and leaders. The future of rural communities, economies, and the nation depends on the educational inclusion, success, and social mobility of all its members.