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# GEOGRAPHY & COLLEGE ACCESS:

## Exploring spatial equity gaps among rural Latina/o students in Texas

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Emerging Scholar Paper

# GEOGRAPHY AND COLLEGE ACCESS: Exploring spatial equity gaps among rural Latina/o students in Texas

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**Although more Latinas/os across the nation are participating in college than ever before, equity gaps in college completion and overall degree attainment continue to exist** (Excelencia in Education, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). Texas is a case in point. In 2019, Latina/o students attending public schools in Texas accounted for 52.6% of the total student population—making them the largest racial/ethnic group in K-12 schools (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2019b). Despite Latina/o youth continuing to be one of the fastest-growing segments of Texas' student population, research shows that persistent and serious leaks remain in their educational pipeline (Alemán et al., 2019). In 2018, only 21% of the Latina/o population aged 25 and older had earned an associate's degree or higher, compared to 47% of white, non-Hispanic adults (Excelencia in Education, 2020). That same year, the Texas Education Agency [TEA] (2019d) reported that only 44.3% of Latina/o high school graduates in Texas were considered "college-ready"[1] compared to 61.3% of white graduates and 83% of Asian graduates, indicating that equity gaps continued to exist. Seeking to address equity gaps throughout the state, in 2015, Texas launched its 60X30TX strategic plan, which aims to have at least 60% of 25- to

34-year-olds in Texas earn a certificate or degree by 2030. If Texas is to achieve its 60X30TX goals, a recognition of Latina/o students' intersecting identities in relation to college access is necessary.

While extensive research about the college-going experiences of Latina/o students exists, few studies have examined the college-going process of rural,[2] Latina/o youth. Understanding the role that rurality plays in Latina/o students' college-going process is of particular importance to Texas as the state is home to the largest number of rural students in the nation (Showalter et al., 2019). This study explores the intersection of race/ethnicity and rurality in the college-going process of Latina/o students—an important but often overlooked student population. Below we synthesize research on the college-going factors influencing Latina/o student college enrollment and then we describe the policy context of Texas.

## THE COLLEGE ENROLLMENT OF LATINAS/OS

Research indicates that Latina/o youth's college-going trajectories are unique relative to other racial/ethnic groups and are influenced by a multitude of individual, cultural and structural factors. The variation of Latina/o students' college-going experiences is heavily influenced by systemic structures that shape their postsecondary opportunities (Acevedo, 2020; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; McDonough, 1997; Núñez, 2014; Oakes et al., 2016; Welton & Melissa, 2014). In our review of the literature, we found persisting college-going factors influencing the college enrollment of Latina/o students in racialized[3] and disparate ways. When reviewing these factors, consideration must be given to the way postsecondary opportunities are structured for Latinas/os.

# What influences Latina/o college enrollment?

| FACTOR | RACIALIZED COLLEGE ACCESS EXPERIENCES AND DISPARITIES | STUDIES |
|---|---|---|
| **Living in a rural area** | Rural Latina/o youth are less likely to access college information, academic preparation for college, and enroll in higher education than white students and their racial/ethnic rural counterparts, especially in rural areas where large rural Latina/o populations reside. A driving factor is the proximity of the rural area to a college campus. | *Freeman, 2017; Gonzales & Ruiz, 2014; Griffin et al., 2011; Irvin et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2010; Sansone et al., 2020.* |
| **College affordability** | Latinas/os are often more concerned about the amount of debt that they or their families may accumulate in their decisions about college. Compared to all students, Latinas/os are far less likely to accept loans and are more likely to work than any other racial/ethnic groups. | *Baum & O'Malley, 2003; Boatman, 2017; Excelencia in Education, 2019, McDonough et al., 2015; Nora et al., 2006; Peréz & McDonough, 2008; Perna, 2008; Rendón et al., 2012; Santiago, 2013; St. John, 2006; UnidosUS, 2020, US Department of Education, 2020.* |
| **Knowledge of the college admissions process** | Latinas/os often have less access to accurate college information, resources, and social networks (including higher education institutions and actors) within their home environment. | *Acevedo, 2020; Ceja, 2006; Dache-Gerbino et al., 2018; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2020; López-Turley, 2009; Martinez & Huerta, 2018; Martinez et al., 2018; Núñez et al., 2013; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Oakes et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Salazar et al. 2021.* |
| **Perceived academic abilities** | Latinas/os are found to have lower aspirations to complete college than white students. But there is variation that is uniquely pronounced among Mexicans. Latinos/as often report having higher levels of academic self-doubt than white students. | *Bohon et al., 2006; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Gildersleeve, 2010; Hirschman, 2016; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Martinez & Huerta, 2018; Massey et al., 2011; Núñez, 2014; Núñez et al., 2013; Núñez & Gildersleeve, 2016; Saw et al., 2018; Solórzano & Villapando, 1998; Vela-Gude et al., 2009.* |
| ***Confianza*** | Latina/o students and their families value social networks that are built on confianza, or mutual trust. Building confianza between Latina/o students, their families and college agents yields higher levels of knowledge about college and confidence for interacting with institutional agents. | *Acevedo, 2020; Auerbach, 2004; Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Núñez, 2009; Ozuna et al., 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Yamamura, et al., 2010.* |



## THE TEXAS POLICY CONTEXT

Over the years, Texas has implemented several statewide initiatives related to college access and readiness in an effort to close educational attainment gaps among students. This includes initiatives such as the 1998 Texas Top 10% Plan, which grants high school seniors graduating in the top 10% of their class automatic admission to public institutions (Cortes & Klasik, 2020). In 2000, with persistent gaps in educational attainments, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB] (2005) adopted the Closing the Gaps by 2015 strategic plan. The plan was directed at closing educational gaps within Texas and between Texas and other states (THECB, 2005). While the plan targeted all Texans, it was especially aimed at increasing the postsecondary enrollment and graduation rates of Latina/o and Black students—two racial/ethnic student groups who have been traditionally underserved in higher education (THECB, 2015). The latest report, published in 2016, showed that the state closed gaps in most areas, but some targets were not fully met (THECB, 2016). For example, although overall graduation rates improved among Black and Latina/o students, their rates continued to trail behind those of other students (THECB, 2016).

In 2015, the THECB launched the 60x30TX strategic plan, outlining several state goals in an effort to prepare more students for an educated workforce (THECB, 2015). Currently, one of these goals includes increasing the number of Latina/o students completing a postsecondary certificate or degree from 96,657 in 2015 to at least 285,000 by 2030 (THECB, 2019). However, recent trends demonstrate that Texas may not meet this goal (THECB, 2019). The most recent THECB progress report (2019) revealed that the annual degree completion rate in 2018 had dropped considerably compared to 2016 and 2017, suggesting that if the pace did not pick up in subsequent years, the 2030 benchmark would not be achieved (THECB, 2019). Moreover, of all the goals and targets in the 60x30TX strategic plan, the direct high school-to-college enrollment rate has made no progress since 2015, indicating a need for higher education and K–12 stakeholders to "step up efforts to accelerate progress" (THECB, 2019, p. 8).

If Texas is to meet its 60x30TX strategic plan goals, careful consideration must also be given to the geographical regions in which students prepare for college. In 2019, the *State of Student Aid and Higher Education in Texas* annual report revealed that the educational attainment levels across the state varied dramatically by region (Fletcher et al., 2020). Rural areas like East Texas, West Texas, the Panhandle, and the Rio Grande Valley had lower levels of educational attainment when compared to more urban regions like Central Texas and the Gulf Coast.

**The purpose of this paper is to explore how geography shapes the opportunities and experiences of rural Latina/o youth in Texas.** Specifically, this paper describes the spatial (in)equities in Texas and explores the college-going experiences of rural Latina/o youth in Texas. Having a better understanding of the spatial (in)equities found throughout Texas and how rural students' geography shapes their college-going opportunities can help inform policies and practices aimed at increasing college access for rural Latina/o students. Two central questions guided our paper:

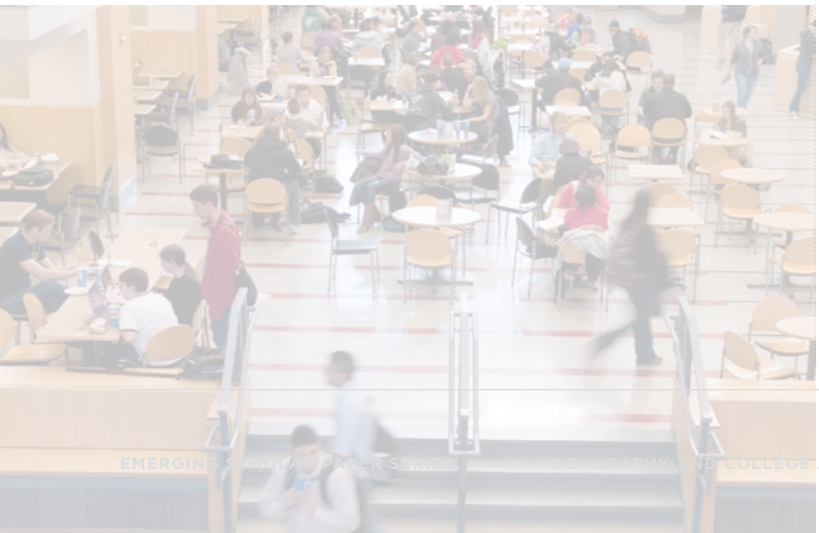
**Research Questions**

1. **What is the geographic (or spatial) distribution of postsecondary educational attainment in rural and urban areas in Texas?**
   - a. **Do the enrollment outcomes across regions vary by race/ethnicity?**
2. **In what ways do rural Latina/o youth describe how their geography shapes their college-going (in)opportunities?**

## Method

We employed a convergent parallel design which entails collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data separately and then merging results into an overall interpretation (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Quantitative data were derived from multiple sources: the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year estimates, Texas Education Agency (TEA), National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and AtoZ Business Registration Database. Qualitative data came from 49 semi-structured interviews with rural Latina/o high school seniors. These interviews were conducted during two consecutive summers (2017 and 2018) in the middle of students' college matriculation process in two regions: South Texas and the Rio Grande Valley (RGV).

The two datasets were obtained, analyzed separately, and then interpreted together. The purpose of such design is "to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic" (Morse, 1991, p. 122), thus providing a more complete understanding of how geography not only shapes college (in)opportunity in rural areas of Texas, but also how Latina/o rural youth make sense of (in)opportunities.



## Results

Research on the college-going experiences of students often overlooks how geography shapes students' decision-making processes and opportunities (Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Hillman, 2016, 2017; Tate, 2008; Turley, 2009). Among the limited but growing number of studies that address college access and enrollment for rural students (e.g., Hallmark & Ardoin, forthcoming; Sansone et al., 2020; Stone, 2017; Tieken, 2016), only a few address the intersection of race/ethnicity and rurality beyond statistical differences (e.g., Means et al., 2016). Our use of a mixed-methods research design gave us the opportunity to have a more holistic understanding of how geography not only shapes college opportunities broadly in Texas, but also how it shapes the college-going experiences of rural Latina/o youth, specifically. Below, we summarize and describe the spatial (in)equities we found through our research.

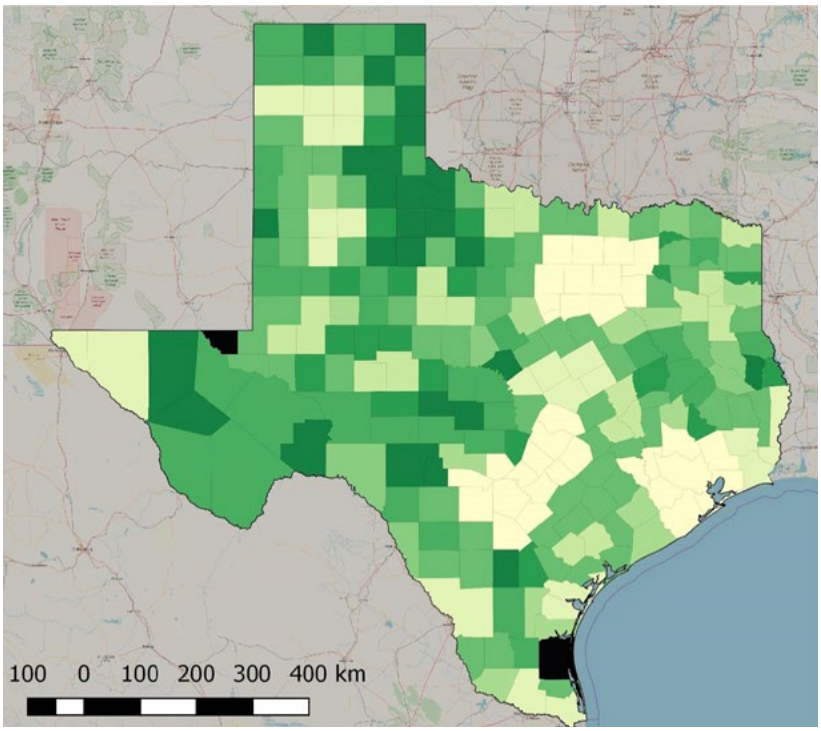
**FINDING 1:**

# LATINA/OS MAKE UP 34% OF THE RURAL POPULATION IN TEXAS

Texas has 254 counties of which 172 (or 68%) are considered non-metro (or rural)[4] and 82 (or 32%) are considered metro (or urban) counties (US Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2013, see Map 1). Latinas/os make up 34% of the rural population in Texas—a 14.3% increase from 2010, signaling a growing influx and presence of Latinas/os in these regions.

**Map 1**

The majority of counties in Texas are rural




Legend

Classifications

- Metro - 1 million or more
- Metro - 250,000 to 1 million
- Metro - < 250,000
- Nonmetro: >20,000 or more (adjacent to metro area)
- Nonmetro> 20,000 or more (not adjacent to metro area)
- Nonmetro: 2,500 to 19,999 (adjacent to a metro area)
- Nonmetro: 2,500 to 19,999 (not adjacent to a metro area)
- Nonmetro:< 2,500 (adjacent to metro area)
- Nonmetro: < 2,500 (not adjacent to metro area)
- Missing information

FINDING 2:

## OF ALL THE K-12 STUDENTS IN RURAL COUNTIES, A MAJORITY WERE STUDENTS OF COLOR (58.2%) AND OF THAT NUMBER

# 46.9%

## WERE LATINA/O STUDENTS

Nearly 65%[5] of all school districts in Texas are located in non-metro areas (excluding charter schools), representing an important part of the education system in Texas (TEA, 2020). Of all K-12 students in non-metro counties, 46.9% were Latina/o and 41.8% were white. Black students represented 7.8% of the K-12 student population in rural school districts and other races, including Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander, represented less than 3.5%. Overall, 58.2% of K-12 rural students were students of color.

Our descriptive analysis of rural students suggests that they are diverse and have unique economic characteristics and challenges that can influence their educational opportunities. For example, the percentage of students eligible to receive free lunch[6] among all students enrolled in school districts in non-metro areas was 53.7%. This rate is much higher than the 42.6% observed in metro areas. This is an indication of the unique economic challenges students in rural areas face. Table 1 summarizes the geographical distribution and selected demographics of non-metro and metro students in Texas as of 2018 (TEA, 2019b; n.d.):

## TABLE 1

A HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF RURAL STUDENTS THAN URBAN STUDENTS ARE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE LUNCH.

| | TOTAL | NON-METRO | METRO |
|---|---|---|---|
| % POPULATION | 27,885,195 | 11% | 89% |
| % OF LATINA/O POPULATION | 10,921,556 | 34% | 40% |
| % OF COUNTIES | 254 | 68% | 32% |
| % OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS | 1,023 | 64.8%* | 35.2%** |
| % OF LATINA/O STUDENTS IN K-12 | 2,825,786 | 47% | 53% |
| % OF STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE LUNCH | 2,376,860 | 53.7% | 42.6% |
| % OF STUDENTS ARE ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED | 3,279,528 | 65% | 60% |
| % OF STUDENTS THAT ARE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS | 1,055,117 | 13% | 20% |

*Denotes: used rural and non-metro definition from TEA (2019a) to calculate the % of non-metro and metro school districts excluding charters.

**Denotes: used urban, suburban and other central definitions from TEA (2019a) to calculate the % of non-metro and metro school districts excluding charters.

**FINDING 3:**

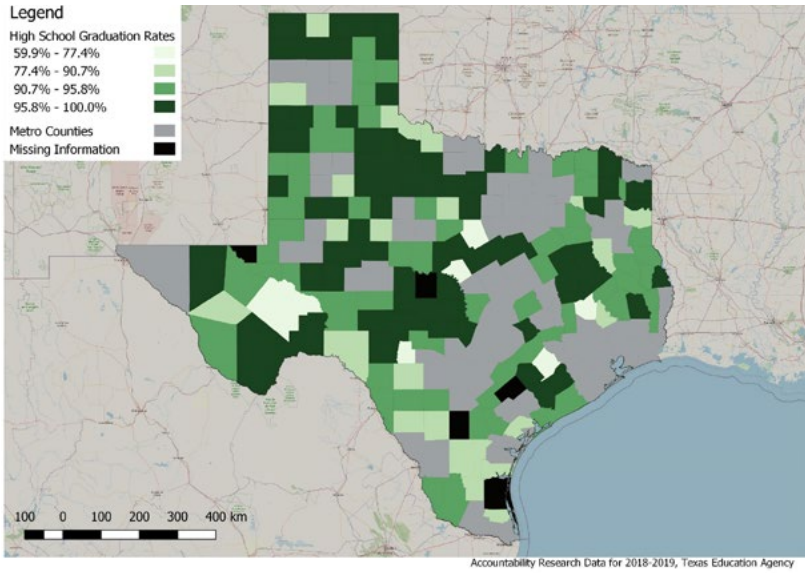
# HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND COMPLETION RATES WERE HIGHER IN NON-METRO COUNTIES THAN IN METRO COUNTIES

According to results from the weighted average calculations of TEA's (2021; 2019c) four-year longitudinal data, the average high school graduation rate for non-metro counties in 2018 was 92.7% while in metro counties it was 89.8%. Map 2 includes the distribution of high school graduation rates ranging from 59.9% to 100% for non-metro counties.

Map 2

Most high school graduation rates in non-metro counties in Texas are above 90%

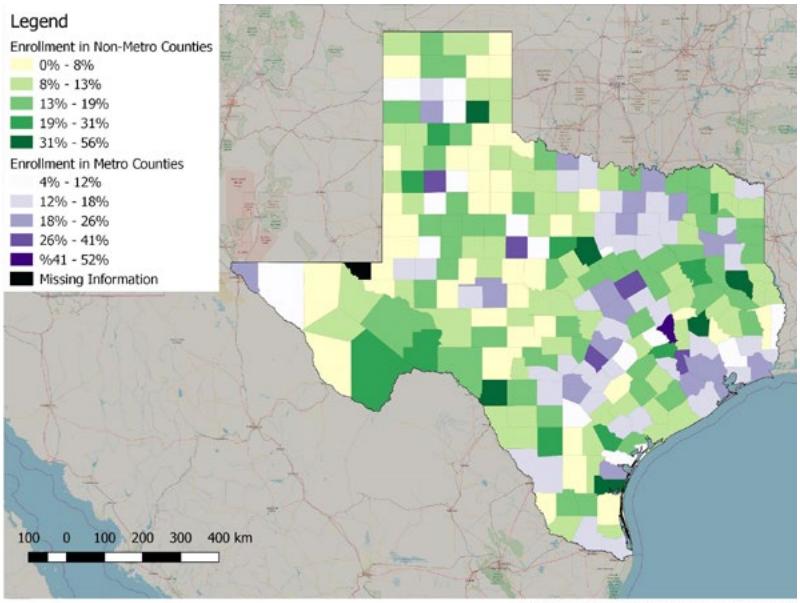
**Map was created using a jenk natural breaks classification method designed to identify natural groupings in the data*




Accountability Research Data for 2018-2019, Texas Education Agency

Map 3

College enrollment in rural counties lags behind urban counties




2014-2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimat

**FINDING 4:**

## WHILE RURAL STUDENTS, REGARDLESS OF BACKGROUND, GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL AT HIGHER RATES THAN URBAN STUDENTS, THEY ENROLLED AND GRADUATED COLLEGE AT SUBSTANTIALLY LOWER RATES WHEN COMPARED TO THEIR COUNTERPARTS

One would expect that the observed trends in high school completion rates in non-metro counties would continue into college enrollment and educational attainment rates. However, according to 5-year ACS estimates, in 2018 only 234,341 (12%) of the population 25 or older had attained a bachelor's degree in non-metro counties while in metro counties that number was 3,175,495 (20%). This gap in educational attainment between rural and urban students points to important differences in college access that would ultimately impact the economic conditions of those spaces.

A deeper dive into college enrollment trends also reveals that in 2018 among all students enrolled in college, only 8.2% (or 126,070) were living in non-metro areas while 91.7% (or 1,408,239) were living in metro areas (see Map 3). Considering that the percent of the population between the ages of 20-24 is about 7% in both rural and urban areas in Texas (American Community Survey [ACS], 2018), the unequal enrollment trends between rural and urban students cannot be attributed to population demographics. One area of possible explanation is the unequal distribution of educational opportunities among rural communities

FINDING 5:

# MORE

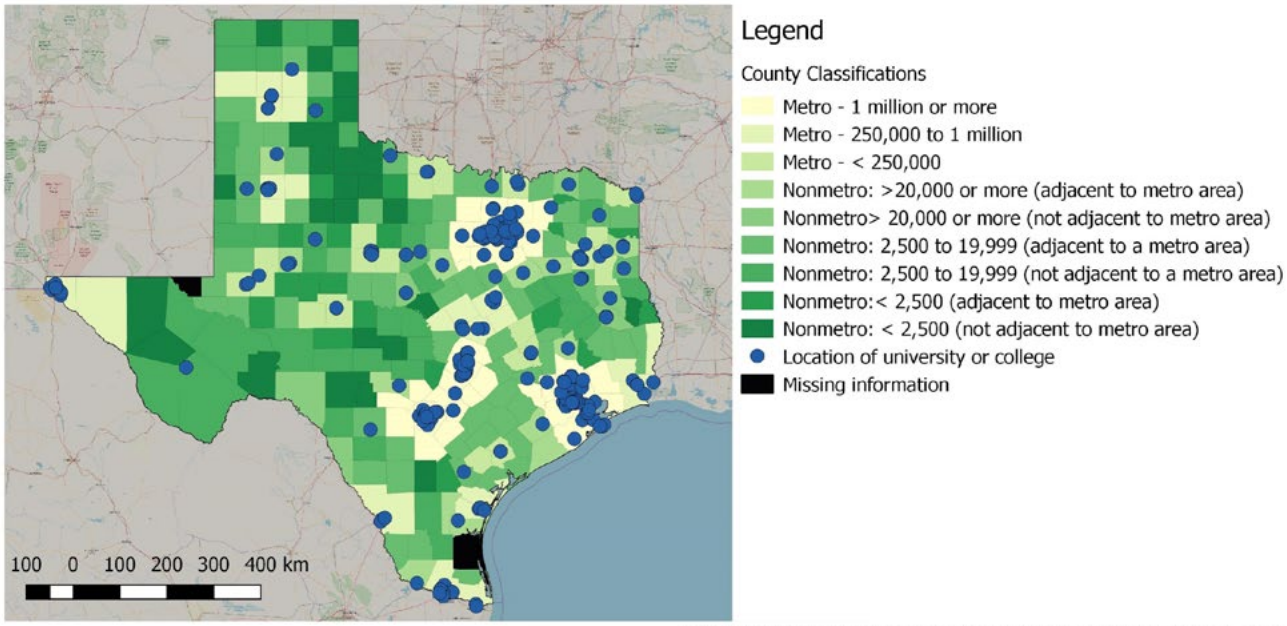
## colleges are located in urban regions than rural regions in Texas

Aligned with the literature on education deserts and college proximity (Hillman, 2016, 2017; Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Turley, 2009), we found that more colleges and universities were located in urban counties than rural counties in Texas. In 2017, metro areas had 255 (87%) higher education institutions, while non-metro areas had 37 (13%).

Furthermore, the distribution of college enrollees across 2-year and 4-year institutions by race shows an important disparity particularly in non-metro counties. In non-metro counties, Latina/o enrollment of undergraduate students accounts for 31.9% (or 42,386) while the enrollment of white non-Hispanic undergraduate students is 48.6% (or 64,444). This disparity is non-existent in metro counties where college enrollment has increased over the last decades among Latina/os. In metro counties, Latinas/os represent 35.9% (or 542,777) of all undergraduate enrollment and white non-Hispanic undergraduate students represent 34.4% (or 520,189).

Map 4

More colleges are located in urban regions than rural regions in Texas




National Center of Education Statistics and AtoZ Business Registry Database, 2017

FINDING 6:

## LOCAL AND REGIONAL COLLEGES PROVIDED AN ACCESS POINT FOR RURAL LATINA/O COMMUNITIES IN TEXAS

**WELL, THE ONLY TIME COLLEGES DO COME OUT TO OUR SCHOOL IS DURING OUR COLLEGE AND CAREER FAIR DAY...**

The lack of postsecondary institutions in rural communities meant that many rural schools were often overlooked. In our interviews, participants shared that they did not always have access to college recruiters outside their geographical location. This not only limited their educational possibilities, but also influenced the students' understanding of their educational worth. For example, some students felt that the location and size of their rural high school, quality of education, and K-12 politics played a role in why some institutions elected not to recruit them. In essence, the lack of college recruiters from non-regional and non-local schools in rural communities signaled to many students that they were "outsiders" (Serna, 2015, 2019) or not good enough for these academic spaces. Many students noted how community colleges and regional universities were often the only institutions actively recruiting and visiting their rural high schools. Local and regional colleges near rural counties, as a result, played a major role in providing rural students with accessible and affordable educational opportunities (see Crain & Newlin, 2021; Koricich et al., 2020; McClure et al., 2021 for similar findings).

***...It's a one-time day and of course it's a bunch of the local ones around the South Texas area. Texas A&M University-Kingsville, The University of Texas at San Antonio, Incarnate Word University were a bunch of these South Texas schools and vocational schools too.***

**—Alejandro (South Texas)**

ranked second in his graduating class and aspired to go to medical school once he completed his bachelor's degree at a regional university. Throughout his college-going process, Alejandro noticed the lack of non-regional college representatives at his high school.

FINDING 7:

# THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF RURAL COUNTIES MAY BE BOUNDING AND LIMITING THE KIND OF COLLEGE-INFORMATION AND RESOURCES ACCESSIBLE TO STUDENTS

Rural communities in Texas systemically experienced a higher poverty[7] rate and lower median household income (13.6% and $46,591, respectively) when compared to urban communities (11.8% and $55,665, respectively). Moreover, rural communities had housing vacancy rates that were over double that of urban areas (22.8% and 9.6%, respectively).

## TABLE 2.

NON-METRO COUNTIES EXPERIENCE A HIGHER POVERTY RATE AND A LOWER MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

| | Counties In Texas | |
|---|---|---|
| | NON-METRO | METRO |
| Median Household Income (dollars) | $46,591 | $55,665 |
| Unemployment Rate | 3.3% | 3.5% |
| Poverty Rate | 13.6% | 11.8% |
| Housing Vacancy Rate[8] | 22.8% | 9.6% |

2014-2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

**FINDING 7 (cont.):**

While rural counties are not monolithic (Koricich, 2012; Sansone et al., 2020), collectively, our findings revealed urban-rural differences that demonstrate spatial stratification unique to rural communities (see Table 2). More specifically, we found that rural areas have less development and less access to resources and opportunities than urban areas. Our interviews with students suggest that these socio-economic conditions may be impacting the opportunities available to students.

Students, for example, reported having limited access to career opportunities and internships in their area, and some shared that their high school did not always provide transportation to career and college fairs. The lack of transportation also meant that many students had to forgo the opportunity of taking advanced college-level courses like dual credit courses offered only on college campuses.

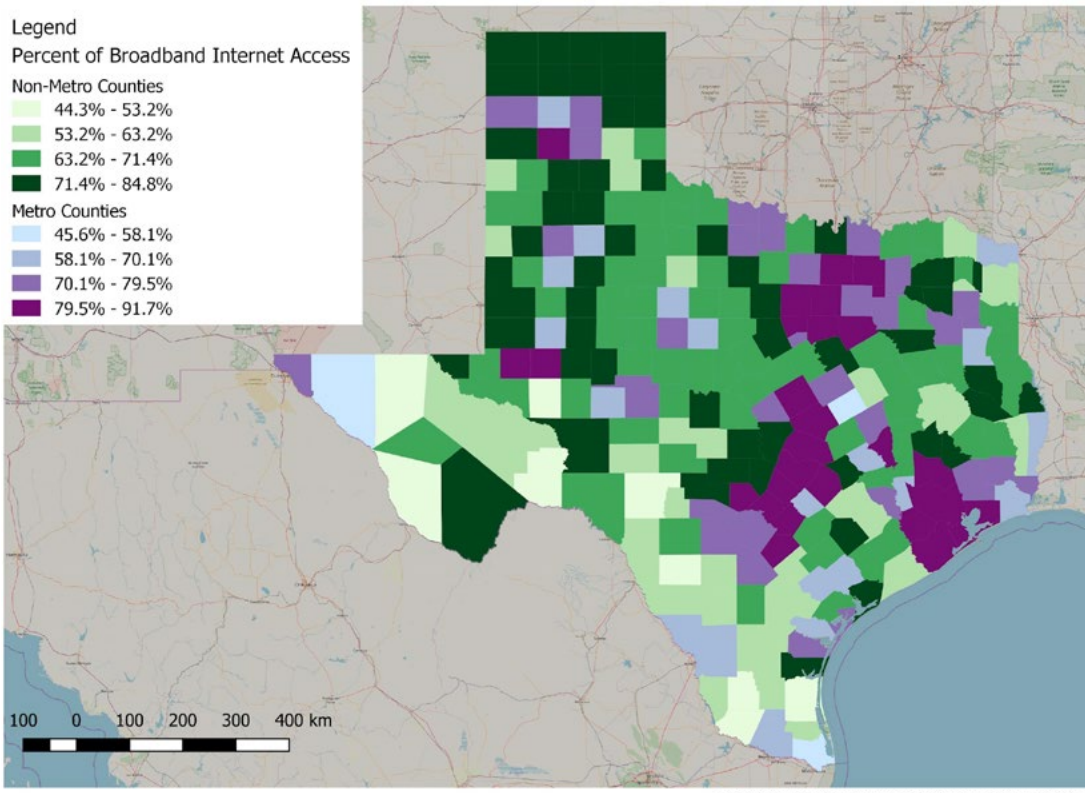
***"A lot of my friends don't go to these outside college events because transportation isn't provided. You have to find your own transportation if you would like to go and so a lot don't – there's a good handful of seniors that don't drive and so they wouldn't get the opportunity to go to something like that.***

**—Alex (South Texas)**

a second-generation college student who started preparing for college at a young age and hopes to major in engineering, talked about the variety of college recruitment activities available to him and his peers. He led a carpool so he and his friends could attend a college fair hosted in the city to give them the opportunity to learn about different colleges.

Map 5

Broadband access across Texas




2014-2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

**FINDING 8:**

## Rural counties in Texas have LESS access to broadband internet than urban counties

Given the growing reliance on technology to complete college applications and online college-level courses, we explored access to broadband internet across counties in Texas. Our descriptive findings showed that 80.5% of metro counties had access to the internet compared to 68.7% of non-metro counties (see Map 5; ACS, 2018). This limitation was even more present in counties located near the US-Mexico border that have some of the lowest broadband internet access rates.

## —Jazmin (RGV)

a student who was salutatorian of her graduating class and hopes to major in engineering at a regional university, spoke about taking concurrent-enrollment online classes and expressed her frustration with the internet:

**In the summer there was one day when I had to come in, it was late at night. I had to submit an assignment at 11pm but I already had it done at 8pm. The internet wasn't working at home so I had to come to my high school, hang out in the front and upload it…And if not, I would sometimes go to the gym. But the gym has spotty wifi so it's on and off.**

**FINDING 8 (cont.):**

In our interviews with rural students, many revealed they relied on the internet to gain information about colleges and scholarships. Some used it to search for college admission deadlines, program majors, and cost of attendance, while others used it to complete their assignments for their online dual credit classes. Despite relying on the internet to access information, navigate the admissions process, and complete college homework assignments, many students noted their communities' lack of access to high-speed internet. Some students described their internet access as "slow" and "unreliable," while others noted the poor-quality connection found across the region. Many students also shared that they had to travel to public spaces like their school or community library to access the internet in order to complete early college coursework or submit college admissions materials, creating an issue for those without reliable transportation.

**MANY STUDENTS ALSO SHARED THAT THEY HAD TO TRAVEL TO PUBLIC SPACES LIKE THEIR SCHOOL OR COMMUNITY LIBRARY TO ACCESS THE INTERNET IN ORDER TO COMPLETE EARLY COLLEGE COURSEWORK OR SUBMIT COLLEGE ADMISSIONS MATERIALS, CREATING AN ISSUE FOR THOSE WITHOUT RELIABLE TRANSPORTATION.**

FINDING 9:

## Students shared having limited access to guidance counselors and college-going resources in Spanish

Some students expressed not always having access to a guidance counselor. For example, in some districts, school counselors had a disproportionate number of students to help across different grade levels, while in others, the school counselor had an overwhelming number of roles, reducing their ability to effectively support students through their college-going process. Some students also expressed that while their counselors were helpful, their assistance was often limited because their primary expertise was on high school counseling and not on college-access guidance. Some students also expressed concerns over the lack of college-related information and resources for their Spanish-speaking parents. In many cases, students had to translate information that they did not yet fully understand themselves, such as financial aid information. This highlighted the need for both high schools and higher education institutions to provide students with resources and information in Spanish to foster Latina/o parent involvement.

**Some students also expressed that while their counselors were helpful, their assistance was often limited because their primary expertise was on high school counseling and not on college-access guidance.**



***I think having more Spanish resources would be a great thing because Mr. Valdez and Ms. Perez, who were the college admissions counselors, they were the only ones that knew the college stuff, and the high school counselors that actually knew Spanish, they just knew counseling stuff about high school, not college.***

## —Joaquin (South Texas)

a first-generation college student who is the son of Mexican immigrants and began his college search in the 8th grade, expressed the need for high schools and higher education institutions to provide college planning resources and information in Spanish to bridge cultural and language barriers.

FINDING 10:

## Students often had limited access to college preparation courses and exams

Some students wished they had more access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses. This was especially expressed by students who sought to distinguish themselves from other students in the college admission process. A student from the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) who scored a 33 on his ACT, for instance, noted his frustration with the lack of AP course offerings in his school. In particular, he expressed that while larger schools offered 20 AP classes, his smaller-sized school offered only six at most, limiting his chances to earn competitive merit-based scholarships. The lack of college-level courses like AP in rural high schools is unsurprising as research shows that suburban and urban districts are 10 times more likely to offer access to AP courses than smaller rural districts (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). In addition to the lack of AP courses, some students also lamented not having enough access to college-entrance prep courses, which they feared would reduce their chances of admission and merit-based financial aid. To address this problem, in one of the rural school districts, some teachers got together during the summer and created a prep course for students. However, the prep course was offered outside the students' high school and was not funded by the district. It was also unclear if these teachers were certified to teach college entrance prep courses like the ACT.

## —Alvaro (RGV)

a student from RGV who had applied to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), noted his frustration with the lack of AP course offerings, which he felt limited his chances to earn competitive merit-based scholarships:

# *SO, I THINK THAT IT KIND OF MESSES [WITH] YOUR HEAD.*

***I didn't get the [MIT] scholarship, the thing that messes me up was that I don't ... Like our school is kind of small, so we don't have as much funding as bigger schools and it's a completely merit-based scholarship. So, like other students have 10 AP exams, I barely had five. They had higher ACT scores. I got a 33, they had like 35 average.***

FINDING 11:

## RACIAL POLICING, PARTICULARLY IN BORDER TOWNS LIKE THE RGV, CAN DISCOURAGE RURAL STUDENTS FROM APPLYING TO UNIVERSITIES OR COLLEGES OUTSIDE THEIR REGION

Some students talked about how their lack of formal citizenship status limited their mobility capital[9]. This was especially a concern for students along the Texas-Mexico border in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) where law enforcement presence has increased over the last few years (Aguilar, 2016), making it harder for them to travel, access college resources, and consider colleges outside of their bounded rural region. For these students, choosing a college outside of the RGV was not a viable option because they feared the interior border patrol checkpoint that was about 60 minutes north of their hometown. Even for students who were documented, but had undocumented parents, the choice of them attending a college outside the RGV was difficult to imagine. These students felt like they had no choice but to attend a nearby college for fear that they or an undocumented family member could be detained while trying to cross the checkpoint by car. Unlike previous studies on familism[10], our findings suggest that some Latina/o students may be choosing to enroll in a college close to home because of structural constraints related to citizenship status and border policing as opposed to only family obligations.

**—Juliana (RGV)**

an undocumented student who hopes to obtain her degree to help her family, was interested in visiting and applying to colleges outside the RGV, but could not due to her citizenship status. She describes her situation:

**I wasn't born here in the US. I was born in Mexico, and I never got my citizenship. So, I can't travel far to other colleges. Like my first choice, it was just like I wanted to get far, try to get more scholarships somewhere else, but that's not possible. So, I went to what is possible and that's a regional university.**

# Discussion and Recommendations



**The spatial (in)equities outlined above reveal how educational systems—and not students themselves—are the cause of many roadblocks along rural Latina/o students' educational pipelines.** Our findings suggest that these spatial inequities may be based largely on inequitable resource distribution along the K-12 pipeline (Alemán, 2007, 2009) and the types of capital[11] most valued by colleges and universities (Ardoin & McNamee, 2021; Crain & Newlin, 2021). The growing influx and presence of Latinas/os into rural areas in Texas presents both opportunities and challenges with implications for structural, systemic, and policy change. We offer the following recommendations as a starting point toward addressing spatial equity gaps among rural Latina/o youth in Texas.



# 01

## Texas should create clear policy goals and support programs for rural Latina/o communities.

Our research revealed that a large proportion of rural youth in Texas come from a Latina/o background (47%). If Texas wishes to achieve its 60x30TX goals, intentional place-based policies and support programs need to be implemented to address the localized and intersectional needs of Latina/o students living in rural communities. Texas, for example, can make rural education one of its top priorities, bringing together rural residents, state policymakers, and other partnerships to create targeted opportunities for rural students. One state initiative that has potential for reaching rural Latina/o students is the Virtual Advising Project, developed by THECB in partnership with Texas A&M Agrilife Extension's Rural Student Success Initiative. This cost-effective project uses text messaging to provide students with helpful college information.

**Texas, for example, can make rural education one of its top priorities, bringing together rural residents, state policymakers, and other partnerships to create targeted opportunities for rural students.**

# 02

## Texas should set up a dedicated funding stream that rewards higher education institutions that intentionally serve rural students.

Our interviews with students revealed that local and regional higher education institutions played a major role in their college-going process. Specifically, given the lack of colleges and universities in rural communities, visits from local and regional college recruiters provided Latina/o rural students not only college information, but also accessible and affordable educational options. Given the critical role that local and regional higher education institutions play in providing college access for rural students, Texas should consider offering grants to colleges and universities that purposefully work to enhance the college enrollment and persistence of rural students. These grants can be set up to either reward postsecondary institutions that already have a history of recruiting and graduating rural students but need further support or they can be set up to incentivize institutions that do not currently recruit in rural areas. These grants can support postsecondary institutions' efforts that intentionally reach out to rural high schools; collaboratively work with rural residents and K-12 teachers, counselors, and leaders; and purposefully develop strategies to retain and honor rural students' needs and desires once enrolled.

# 03

## State and local policymakers, in partnership with private and public organizations, should continue to invest in increasing affordable and reliable broadband access to close the digital and postsecondary educational divide in rural Texas.

Our study revealed that rural counties not only had less access to broadband compared to urban counties, but also that rural Latina/o students depended on high-speed internet to search for colleges, navigate the admissions application, and complete advanced-level assignments. Given the role of broadband access in Latina/o students' college-going process, creating legislation to close the digital divide in rural Texas should be a top priority. Broadband experts and providers, in coordination with policymakers, can geographically map areas that lack access to broadband and then allocate funds or grants that specifically promote building broadband infrastructure in rural communities. Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution for state expansion efforts, reviewing what other states have done to address the digital divide can be helpful. We recommend looking at Morton's (2021) compilation of broadband legislative bills for the 2020 legislative session; this interactive tool identifies the legislative efforts of 43 states. We also recommend reading the Pew Charitable Trusts report on promising practices regarding state broadband programs; this report highlights the broadband efforts of nine states (Stauffer et al., 2020).


# 04

## Rural high school counselors should receive training on college readiness.

In this study, we found that while some high school counselors were helpful, they did not always have the training to help students navigate their college admissions process. Given that counselors can be a source of social capital, specific training on the undergraduate admissions process, the types of financial aid available, and the different ways families can be engaged in the college-going process would allow them to better assist rural Latina/o students. This can be done by targeting licensing renewal requirements to support college readiness counseling or by encouraging school districts to draft job descriptions that require counselors to have training on college readiness.

> **Given that counselors can be a source of social capital, specific training on the undergraduate admissions process, the types of financial aid available, and the different ways families can be engaged in the college-going process would allow them to better assist rural Latina/o students.**

# 05

## High school counselors and college recruiters need to consider the role that mobility (or the lack thereof) plays in rural Latina/o students' college-going and decision-making process.

Through interviews, we found that undocumented rural students may be unfamiliar with the resources available to them or may be afraid to apply to colleges that require them to travel outside of their geographical boundaries. Therefore, college recruiters need to not only stay up-to-date with enrollment, admissions, and financial aid policies for undocumented students, but also need to take travel restrictions into consideration when recruiting rural, undocumented students. Similarly, high school counselors need to be up-to-date with immigration policies and embed financial aid options and other information for undocumented students and parents during general college presentations.

## 06

## Rural school districts, with the help of state funding, should expand their transportation services to increase students' access to college resources.

Our study suggests that limited access to transportation meant that many students missed out on college-related opportunities that were not offered on their high school campus. State lawmakers should work closely with rural school districts to consider ways in which transportation can be made available for students to access college-related opportunities like college fairs.

## 07

## Higher education institutions, particularly college recruiters, need to prioritize on-the-ground interactions with rural Latina/o students.

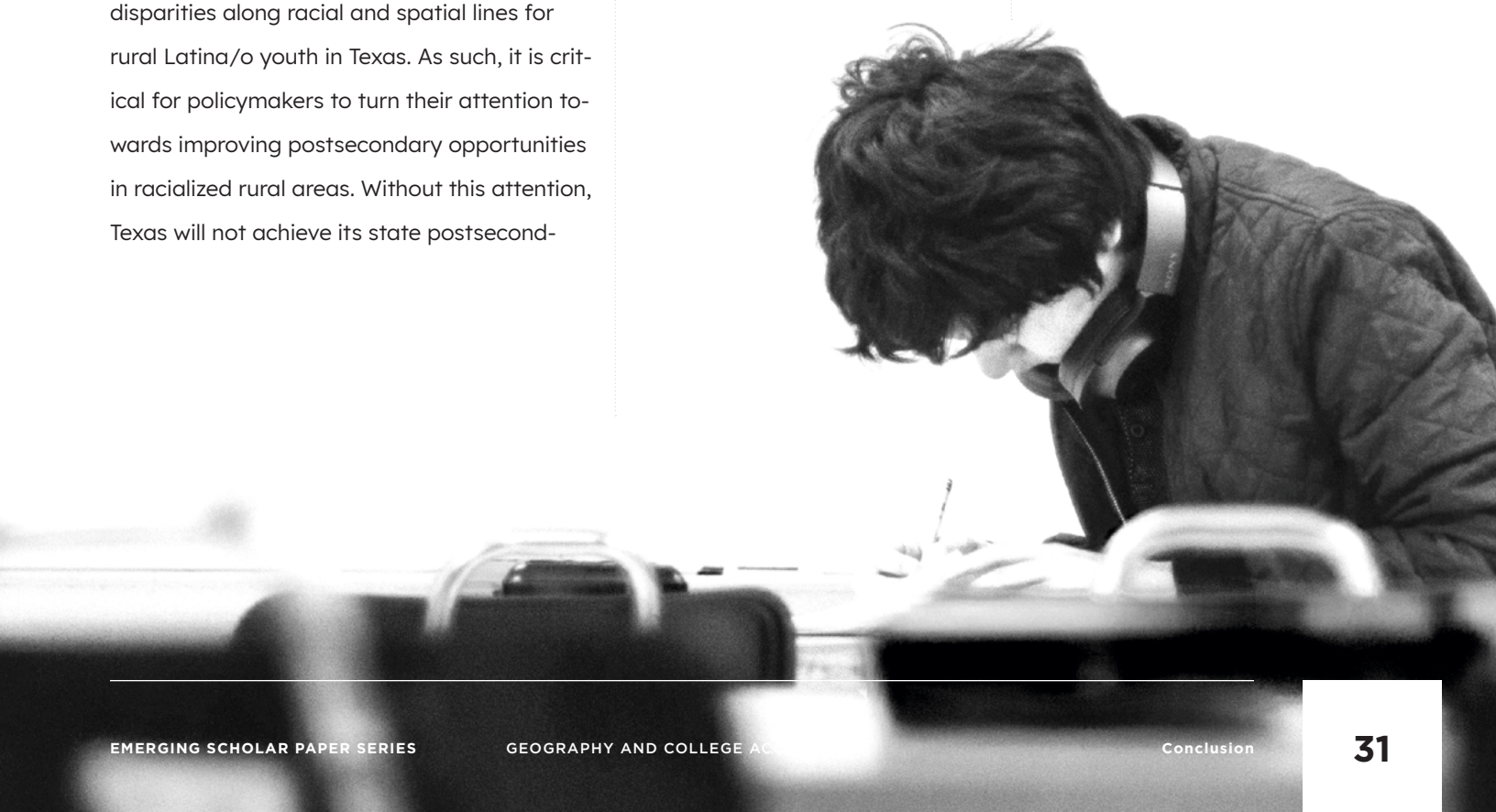
Our analysis showed that rural students are graduating high school in high numbers, but not enrolling in college at the same pace. Interviews with students also revealed that the lack of college recruiters from non-local or non-regional institutions in their communities made them feel like they were not good enough for these academic spaces. Therefore, higher education institutions should make greater efforts to visit high schools in rural communities, share college materials, and interact with both students and their families to ensure their enrollment needs are being met. This not only builds confianza and rapport, but also communicates to students the value of a college degree and signals to them that they are wanted in these spaces. Colleges and universities may also consider creating college access programs that target rural students. For example, the University of Chicago runs the Emerging Rural Leaders Program, which offers two fully funded summer programs to top freshmen and juniors from rural and small-town high schools. The purpose of this program is to reduce barriers to college for rural students by offering on-campus programming, mentoring, and financial aid to help prepare them for college (UChicago News, 2019).

# Conclusion



**This white paper focused on the interplay of race/ethnicity and rurality and demonstrated how the unique characteristics of rural regions create both opportunities and challenges for rural Latina/o youth pursuing college and other postsecondary opportunities.**

This is significant given that most higher education researchers, policymakers and practitioners conflate the racial/ethnic diversity of rural areas with whiteness (Watson, 2019). Doing so overlooks the presence of Latinas/os in rural areas and ignores their assets and challenges. In our analysis, we centered both Latinas/os and rurality and found that Latinas/os make up a large proportion of the population living in rural Texas. Our results also identified that there are college access disparities along racial and spatial lines for rural Latina/o youth in Texas. As such, it is critical for policymakers to turn their attention towards improving postsecondary opportunities in racialized rural areas. Without this attention, Texas will not achieve its state postsecondary goals that aim to increase the postsecondary attainment of all youth. What is clear from the findings in this study is that there is an opportunity to develop practices that account for the cultural and place-based needs of rural Latina/o youth that will make them successful in helping them get to and possibly through college. With this momentum, we should continue to build off such promising practices to improve students' educational attainment and create equitable college opportunities for all youth—no matter where they reside.addressing spatial equity gaps among rural Latina/o youth in Texas.



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# Endnotes

[1]In Texas, TEA (2019a) defines college-ready graduates as the percentage of annual graduates who meet or exceed the college-ready and career/military readiness criteria on any one of the following ways: 1) met the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) college readiness standards in reading and mathematics; specifically, met the college-ready criteria on the TSI assessment, SAT, ACT, or by successfully completing and earning an approved credit for a college prep; 2) completed 9 or more hours of postsecondary credit in any subject or 3 or more hours of English/Language Arts and mathematics; 3) scored 3 or more on Advanced Placement (AP) exams or 4 or more on International Baccalaureate (IB) exams; 4) earned an associate's degree while in high school; 5) completed an OnRamps course and received at least three hours of university or college credit in any subject area; 6) earned an industry-based certification; 7) graduated with completed individualized education program (IEP) and workforce readiness; 8) career and technical education (CTE) coursework aligned with industry-based certification; 9) enlisted in the armed forces; 10) special education students graduate under an advanced degree plan; and 11) earned a Level 1 or Level II certificate in any education area. A student is only college-ready if they meet criteria 1–5 (but not criteria 6–11) and only career/military ready if they meet criteria 6–11 (but not criteria 1–5).

[2]Given the exploratory nature of this brief, we define "rural" in two ways. For our quantitative methods, we used the U.S. Department of Agriculture's definition of rural areas, which include non-metro area counties that have some combination of open countryside, rural towns (places with fewer than 2,500 people), and urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of larger labor market areas, or metropolitan areas. For our qualitative section, we expanded the term to include areas that are: 1) geographically isolated; 2) have limited to no access to higher education institutions; 3) have high levels of concentrated poverty; and 4) have high schools that are classified by the Texas Education Agency as rural.

[3]In this paper, racialization refers to the disparate outcomes for Latinas/os that socially constructs racial differences and racial groups (Harvey, 2017).

[4]In this paper, we interchangeably use the term "metro" with "urban" and "non-metro" with "rural."

[5]In this study, non-metro areas included "Rural," "Non-Metro Stable," and "Non-Metro fast growing" (TEA, 2020). This percentage excludes charter schools.

[6]For a student to be eligible for free lunch, they must live in a household earning at or below 130% of the federal poverty guidelines.
[7]Poverty refers to individuals or families whose income has been below the poverty level for the past 12 months (ACS, 2018). In 2018, the federal poverty threshold for a family of four with two children under 18 years of age was $25,465 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.b)

[8]The United States Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines housing vacancy as "A housing unit is vacant if no one is living in it at the time of the interview, unless its occupants are only temporarily absent. In addition, a vacant unit may be one which is entirely occupied by persons who have a usual residence elsewhere" (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a).

[9]Mobility capital refers to the process and attitude towards imagining the possibility of moving (or leaving) (Corbett, 2007). For many rural students, it can be very difficult to attend postsecondary institutions outside their geographic boundaries because of the uneven distribution of mobility opportunities.

[10]Familism is defined as the cultural tendency to privilege family wants and needs over individual goals (see Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Chen & Zerquera, 2018; Martinez, 2013; Pérez & McDonough, 2008).

[11]Although it is beyond the scope of our paper to discuss the various forms of capital that rural students engaged in, we encourage readers to look at the work of McNamee (2019), Means et al. (2016), Nelson (2016), and Tieken (2019). These scholars leverage asset-based frameworks to understand, identify, and amplify the various forms of capital that rural students engage in while navigating the college-going process.


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