

Trends in college attendance rates in rural America

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The benefits of obtaining a college degree are higher than ever in the current economy, as researchers estimate that by the year 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require postsecondary education.

While increasing college enrollment and graduate rates is a national priority, targeting the college behaviors of rural students is particularly important, according to Soo-yong Byun, associate professor of educational theory and policy and Social Sciences Research Institute co-funded faculty. "Almost 10 million students in America go to public schools in rural areas, but rural students are vastly underrepresented in education research. Few studies have examined the college trajectories of rural youth at a time when the country has witnessed a heightened emphasis on increasing college graduation rates."

With a growing number of rural students attending two- and four-year colleges, Byun and his team investigated the [college attendance](#) of over 2,000 students from rural high schools across the United States using data from the Rural High School Aspirations Study and its follow-up study, administered by the National Research Center on Rural Education Support at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Using this unique data set, the research team's analysis, published in the journal *Research in Higher Education*, is the first to explore postsecondary attendance patterns among contemporary rural youth.

"We found that more than half of rural youth attended two-year

institutions during their college career, and about a fourth initially enrolled in a two-year college before enrolling in a four-year college," Byun said. "We also found that students who enrolled in a two-year college only, were far less likely to be enrolled in a college preparation program in high [school](#) and had the lowest educational aspirations."

The researchers further identified factors that affect these college choices, revealing that parental education, college preparatory track and preparation experiences, and teacher expectations predicted students' college attendance patterns.

"Our findings point to the importance of two-year colleges and highlight the influence of family on students' postsecondary [education](#) choices," said Byun. "Additionally, there are more community colleges now than there were a few decades ago, and their proximity creates a greater number of entry points to a four-year college."

In the future, Byun would like to examine if students who first enrolled in a two-year college differed from 4-year attendees in terms of degree completion, and how other factors, such as academic, social and financial, affect four-year college attendance and completion. "In addition, incidences of students taking time off from college, transferring between colleges, starting at two-year colleges, delaying college, attending school as a part-time [student](#), and attending multiple four-year institutions are more common than they were a few decades ago and can all affect [college](#) attendance and completion," Byun said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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