

Project Abstract

Rural and small town students have gained recent national recognition as an underrepresented population in higher education (and in Colorado). However, they are often left out of DEI and innovation discussions, despite unique challenges rural students face in accessing and succeeding in higher education environments. The [CU Boulder Rural Network \(CUBRN\)](#), consisting of more than 50 members (many from A&S) and operating for the past 2 years with little-to-no funding, seeks to elevate rural student voices and innovate ways to better support this population. Most of these rural students are in the College of Arts and Sciences, and this grant proposal seeks to implement engagement and inclusion efforts that seek to improve student access to, and retention through a CU Boulder degree. CUBRN seeks to increase support for our rural-identifying student population through direct engagement and community building.

Project Summary

This grant proposal seeks to address the lack of support for, and attention to, University of Colorado (CU) Boulder undergraduate students (in particular those from the College of Arts and Sciences, but across campus) from rural and small towns, and specifically to implement activities that enhance community/sense of belonging and thus increase retention.

The CU Boulder Inclusion, Diversity and Excellence in Academics (IDEA) Plan mentions the word ‘rural’ twice, once referring to the Office of Pre-College Outreach and Engagement and once related to scaling targeted recruitment initiatives among underrepresented populations “such as rural students” (p. 14).¹ Unfortunately, rural students have traditionally been left out of DEI conversations, despite their existence on campus and diverse perspectives.

The college enrollment rate for 2020 rural Colorado high school graduates was 46% - lower than the state average of 50.5%,² both down 5% from 2019² (national statistics indicate a 56% rural student college enrollment rate).³ Conversations around access to higher education for rural students have increased in recent years, however geographic background is rarely mentioned in discussions of underrepresented students at CU Boulder. This is despite the fact that, according to a statistical analysis by the CUBRN⁴ of undergraduates who entered CU Boulder from 2014-2017, **rural student retention rates are lower than non-rural students**, with 86.9% of rural students and 89.4% of non-rural students being retained to 2nd fall, 81.6% of rural and 84.06% of non-rural students being retained to 3rd fall, and 78.63% of rural and 82.0% of non-rural students being retained to 4th fall.⁵

In fall 2022, based on the Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties definition⁶ 1,532 total full-time CU Boulder undergraduates enrolled graduated from a rural high school.⁷ **This represents 5.5% of the total full-time, undergraduate CU Boulder population** (considering 16% of Colorado students attend PK-12th grades in a rural district).⁷ Current fall

¹University of Colorado Boulder (2020). Inclusion, diversity, and excellence in academics (IDEA) plan. colorado.edu/odece/sites/default/files/attached-files/idea_plan_09212020_.pdf.

²Colorado Department of Higher Education (2022). Pathways to prosperity: Postsecondary access and success for Colorado’s high school graduates. https://highered.colorado.gov/Publications/Reports/Legislative/PostSecondary/2022_Postsecondary_Progress_rel20220503.pdf.

³National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022). High school benchmarks: National college progression rates. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022_HS Benchmarks Report.pdf.

⁴CU Boulder Rural Network (n.d.). Home. <https://www.colorado.edu/initiative/cu-boulder-rural-network>.

⁵Dutta, U. (2022). Statistical analysis: Differences in retention rates. Taken from 'Rural Buffs: Supporting Small Town Students' presentation. Conference for Student Success and Advising, 2022. February 17, 2022.

⁶U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics (2014). 2013 NCHS Urban-rural classification scheme for counties. [cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_02/sr02_166.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_02/sr02_166.pdf).

⁷Ganss, K. (2022) CU Boulder rural undergraduate students summary report: Fall 2022. CU Boulder Rural Network. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1i0aWHmjCeJWje7Rin57pM9cCkZciKM9sdq8RUyLJjRo/>.

2022 rural students represent every academic college, with 19% who are the first in their family to go to college, 21% who are BIPOC, and 72% who are Colorado residents.⁷ 48% of these students, or 732 total are in the College of Arts and Sciences.⁷ A&S, as the largest college with the most diverse array of majors, has the greatest potential to use innovative methods to make positive change in how rural students are valued on campus.

The 2022 Campus Culture Survey results indicate 41% of rural undergraduate students overall, and 45% of A&S rural students (compared to 33% of non-rural students overall, and 38% of A&S rural students) *somewhat disagree/disagree/strongly disagree* to the statement “I do not feel left out” and 29% of rural students overall, and 34% of A&S rural students (compared to 23% of non-rural students overall, and 27% of non-rural A&S students overall) *somewhat disagree/disagree/strongly disagree* to the statement “I have a sense of community at CU.”⁸ Rural students [who spoke with CUBRN](#) expressed a lack of community, little attention paid to their identity, cultural shifts, and financial struggles.

Support from the A&S Dean’s Innovation Fund is requested to address the lack of opportunities for rural students to express and celebrate their identities on the CU Boulder campus. By creating opportunities for rural-identifying students to come together to join in social activities, the objective of the project will be to create a sense of belonging through community involvement on campus, ultimately leading to increased retention (and in turn, recruitment and access). Using the principles of Rendon’s Theory of Validation, we will foster a welcoming environment where rural students can feel visible and accepted in the greater campus community.⁹ The project will have three social events per semester, including 1) a welcoming event for new/returning students, 2) an off campus or outdoor activity, and 3) a closing social.

Upon receipt of grant funds, Project Lead Amanda Stewart, in partnership with Claudia Numan (both from A&S), will begin discussions with A&S and campus partners to increase rural student support. First, a welcome back event will occur in the first two weeks of spring 2023. All rural-identified students will be invited through targeted emails (a rural student Google group is already in existence), which will be familiar from fall 2022 rural student events (funded as a one-time allocation from various campus partners). Printed advertisements will also be utilized for all events. At this first event, refreshments and ‘rural buff’ items will be provided (CUBRN has a current limited supply in stock). CUBRN faculty/staff members and A&S partners (i.e. admissions, advising) will facilitate ice breakers and oversee community building activities. In mid-spring, all rural students will be invited to an outdoor winter activity off campus. Transportation and admission will be provided through grant funds on a first-come, first-served registration basis. During the latter portion of the semester, to gain the perspectives of rural A&S students in particular, a focus group will be hosted (via email recruitment and pulling from attendance from prior events). For the last semester activity, a drop-in community event will be hosted prior to finals which will include refreshments and small group activities (and ‘rural buff’ promotional items). Rural students graduating in May will be recognized and a satisfaction survey will be distributed to assess spring activities.

In fall 2023, grant funds will be used for a welcome event in partnership with New Student and Family Programs, where new rural students will be invited to a community gathering. New student enrollment information will be gathered from the Office of Data Analytics to ensure the invitation list is accurate. Intentional discussions will be facilitated by

⁸University of Colorado Boulder Office of Data Analytics (2022). Campus Culture Survey - Unit Level Dashboard. <https://www.colorado.edu/dei/survey-results/unit-level-dashboard>.

⁹Rendon, L. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, Vol. 19, No. 1. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/BF01191156.pdf>.

CUBRN and A&S members around the formation of a rural student campus organization as well as highlighting other student support resources. The second fall event, in mid-October, will be an off-campus event (ex. athletic, festival, theatrical). Transportation, admission, and any equipment will be provided via grant funds, as rural students with financial need are often unable to participate in such events. For the third fall event, a drop-in community event will be hosted in early December, before final exams. Refreshments and social activities will be provided, along with intentional recognition of rural students graduating in December. During this last event, a final satisfaction/assessment survey will be distributed. Logistical support will be provided throughout the semester for any student organization that may form due to this initiative.

Although this grant will be executed at the direction of the CUBRN and led by Amanda Stewart with A&S, we aim to positively impact and partner with a wide range of campus entities. We recognize access and retention are intimately related and plan to work with CU Boulder as well as A&S Admissions to assist in recruitment events, and in hopes of encouraging rural students to serve as ambassadors. In addition, campus partners (including faculty and staff) who identify as part of the rural community will be invited to engage in programming.

Budget and Justification (Spring 2023-Fall 2024)

Item	Amount	Description/Justification
On and off-campus community-building events	\$3,000.00	\$375 per event for the first and last events of each semester (2 on-campus events in spring and 2 on-campus events in fall), as well as \$750 per event for the mid-way ‘outing/off-campus’ event for students from rural and small towns. This budget will be allocated for costs associated with the events including food/catering, transportation, space rental, and tickets/registration (as applicable), with goals to assist in community building of rural students. We plan for 46 students during on campus events (\$8.15/student) and 15 students during off campus events (\$50/student).*
Rural student (and supporter) giveaway and promotional items	\$750.00	Modeled after first-generation swag/promotional items (and associated costs) from the Center from the Inclusion and Social Change with plans for additional ‘Rural Buff’ stickers (1,000, approx. \$215, <i>Standout Stickers</i>), buttons (600, approx. \$165, <i>Pure Buttons</i>) and bags (125, approx. \$370, <i>4Imprint</i>). To be distributed to rural and small town students and A&S/other campus supporters.
A&S Rural Focus Groups	\$250.00	Anticipating 10 students in attendance, to provide \$10 gift cards (\$150) and an additional \$150 for refreshments during the event.
Advertising/awareness	\$250.00	Approximate cost to print posters and small flyers to promote events (although most advertising will be done electronically).
Total	\$4,250.00	

*Predicted attendance is based on fall 21/spring 22 attendance data for similar First Generation Scholars programming (585 students total).¹⁰ Over 6 events, average attendance was 22.5 students/event (a 3.8% ‘show rate’).¹ We anticipate a lower rate due to being less established on campus of about 3% (3% of 1,535 is 46)⁷ for on campus events and 1% for off campus events (1% of 1,535 is 15). We provided refreshments for 55 students at our Welcome Event in fall 22, slightly exceeding predictions but anticipate spring enrollment will be slightly lower.

¹⁰Jones, M. (2022). Email communication. March 16, 2022. First Generation Scholars Program - CU Boulder.