

A Unique Philanthropic Effort Shines a Light on Rural Students *rootEd Alliance Case Study for the Missouri Equity Project*

“I am interested in college because I want a better life. Many of the people that I have relied on to provide for me have had hard times at some point in their lives because of their occupations or lack thereof. I don’t want the same for myself or my future family. I want to be a generational blessing by breaking the cycle of poverty and enjoying a fulfilling career. I have a plan and the first step is college. I have taken honors and AP classes, studied for and taken the ACT multiple times, and worked hard in every class that I have ever taken to ensure my chances of getting into the school of my choice. I have always enjoyed learning and I believe that education will take me anywhere I want to go.”

Leslie Myrick, West Plains, Missouri
University of Missouri, Class of 2023
Recipient of the rootEd Undergraduate Scholarship

About two years ago, a group of family business owners and philanthropists set out to answer a series of increasingly urgent questions: in Missouri and across the U.S., why are rural students the least likely to pursue higher education compared to their urban and suburban peers? And what kinds of interventions are needed to close that gap?

Identifying the Challenges for Rural Students

Rural America is home to one third of our country’s K-12 students¹; in Missouri, roughly 70% of school districts are rural.² These students graduate from high school at a higher rate than the national average yet face unique barriers when transitioning to life after high school. Only one-third of 18-24 year olds from rural areas and towns are enrolled in a two- or four-year college, compared to nearly half of urban and suburban youth.³ This gap is not about a lack of potential – it is about a series of obstacles that are increasingly difficult for rural students to overcome in the absence of dedicated support.

On top of the economic distress and health crises that have afflicted rural communities for the past decade, the isolation of rural schools creates particular challenges for their students—fewer postsecondary options close to home; limited access to technology; more difficulty attracting and retaining quality educators; less availability of jobs, internships, and after school activities. These challenges are compounded by a notable absence of philanthropically-funded service providers to fill in the gaps in underfunded and overstretched rural districts; it is estimated that less than 5% of philanthropic dollars go towards the needs of rural communities on any issue.⁴ Taken together, rural students in Missouri and elsewhere are faced with a combination of hard choices and limited support when accessing higher education.

Crafting the Solution

To address these challenges, **rootEd Alliance** was born. An alliance of both funders and implementing partners, rootEd is a collaborative philanthropic effort to clear a path to a stronger future for students in rural America with advice, exposure, and access to financial resources. While the initiative aims to highlight the unique needs of rural students nationally, its efforts have primarily focused on Missouri, where nearly 1,500 students were directly served by Alliance members in the 2018-19 school year across six districts, including Cape Girardeau, Marshfield, Lebanon, Poplar Bluff, Union, and Warrenton.

To accomplish its goals, rootEd Alliance partners with and supports organizations actively involved in improving postsecondary access and completion among rural high school and college students. With strategic guidance and oversight

¹ *High School Benchmarks 2017: National College Progression Rates*, NATIONAL STUDENT CLEARINGHOUSE (October 24, 2017), <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017HSBenchmarksReport-1.pdf>

² Raw MO DESE data analysis; https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/this-small-rural-school-is-one-of-missouri-s-biggest/article_8ec6a110-8859-5582-916c-3b600bdfae52.html

³ *Percentage of persons ages 18 to 29 enrolled in colleges or universities, by age group, 4-category local, and sex*, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS (2015), <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables/b.3.b.-1.asp>

⁴ John L. Pender, *Foundation Grants to Rural Areas From 2005 to 2010: Trends and Patterns*, USDA ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE (June 2015), https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/43991/53165_eib141_summary.pdf?v=42181; Ryan Schlegel, *Is Rural America Philanthropy’s Final Frontier?* NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON RESPONSIVE PHILANTHROPY (November 2, 2015), https://www.ncrp.org/2015/11/rural-funding-philanthropy.html?sm_au=iVVlWRB1vTQnD6ZQ

including a shared framework for measuring and improving impact, rootEd Alliance links these organizations together to create a holistic model that supports students starting in high school through college graduation.

During the initiative's first year, its primary goal was to meaningfully increase the number of rural high school students enrolling in postsecondary programs, including community colleges, vocational/technical schools, and four-year universities. Two rootEd Alliance implementing partners, College Advising Corps and the Ayers Foundation, placed dedicated advisors at participating high schools to support and encourage the entire senior class to develop and pursue a postsecondary plan. Through "FAFSA frenzies" (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and targeted ACT prep, financial aid award letter reviews and one-on-one meetings with students and parents, the advisors guided each student through their own college exploration process and helped them identify the best options available to them. As one student noted, "There are just so many questions that build up...The school counselors are always busy with other things, so having [my dedicated college advisor] here was like, 'Oh my gosh, he can answer all these questions!'"

To supplement and optimize these advising efforts, rootEd Alliance collected a significant amount of qualitative and quantitative data through student surveys and focus groups, advisor-led tracking systems, and district databases. By understanding student aspirations at the outset and tracking their progress towards key milestones — such as FAFSA completion, postsecondary application completion, and asserting confidence in a postsecondary plan — advisors were able to proactively address student needs and tailor advising services to students' individual goals and progress. As another student said, "my rootEd advisor has done so much for me that it's hard to put it all into words. They helped me with everything that I've done for college—I haven't done any of it by myself. I don't know if I could have figured it out." Throughout the year, rootEd Alliance also focused on creating opportunities for students to experience and engage with college campuses and different career paths.

Given that many rural students who do enroll in postsecondary programs opt for community college (often aided by Missouri's A+ Scholarship program), and in recognition of the challenges rural students face in persevering through these programs, rootEd Alliance has also built partnerships with Ozarks Technical Community College (OTC) and Three Rivers Community College (TRCC). With support from rootEd Alliance and technical assistance from Achieving the Dream, a national expert in improving student success at community colleges, OTC and TRCC have launched pilot programs to implement "intrusive advising" and other best practices to increase persistence and graduation rates, starting with rural students. An early and critical part of this work has been to strengthen the bridge from high school to college and stem "summer melt" (a common scenario in which high-school graduates plan to enroll in college but ultimately don't attend due to lack of resources, guidance or support). New Student Success Advisors at OTC and TRCC spent the spring and summer working in close coordination with rootEd Alliance's advisors at the high school level, encouraging students to enroll at these colleges and providing consistent support as they transitioned to their first day of classes. During the 2019-2020 school year and beyond, rootEd Alliance will sustain and enhance this pipeline of support while working with OTC and TRCC to increase the likelihood of rural students persisting in college and completing their degrees.

Through a new partnership with the Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis, rootEd Alliance has also provided financial support for a select number of students to pursue their college plans at four-year institutions. Through the rootEd Undergraduate Scholarship and rootEd Transfer Scholarship programs, renewable, last-dollar scholarships were awarded to both graduating seniors and community college transfer students to remove the financial hurdles and go the last mile in their ability to pursue and persist through college. Over the summer, the initial group of scholarship recipients, together with a parent or family member, came together on the Southeast Missouri University campus to connect with one another and walk through the transition to college, particularly coming from a rural community, for both students and families.

Progress to Date & Future Potential

rootEd Alliance is currently collecting data from its initial cohort of students as they complete the first semester of their postsecondary program, and early indicators signal substantial progress towards improved access to higher education. In fact, seventy-two percent of seniors across the six high schools in Missouri applied to postsecondary programs, and FAFSA completion — a crucial step to making college more affordable and attainable — increased by over twenty percent compared to last year. rootEd Alliance resources and advisors were critical in helping students reach these milestones;

twenty percent of students reported that they would not be going to college if not for their advisor, and fifty-eight percent asserted that their advisor helped influence their choice of postsecondary program.

Going forward, rootEd Alliance is committed to expanding, enhancing, and deepening this work, driven by research and data and informed by student experiences. While the primary purpose of the Alliance is to meaningfully move the needle on postsecondary outcomes for rural students, success also hinges upon equipping districts, colleges, and communities with the tools and resources needed to foster a true college-going culture, deepen connections between college and career, and promote student success over the long term. That is why rootEd Alliance and its partners are also focused on identifying best practices that could be adapted to the unique local needs of different rural areas while also implemented at scale – whether through a network of service providers, institutions of higher education, or districts themselves. There is much work to be done, but the early progress makes it clear that this is a worthwhile endeavor that has the potential to pay off many times over for the state of Missouri.