



Opening the Door: Rural Pathways to Law School

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Executive Summary

Rural communities across the United States and Canada continue to face significant challenges in accessing legal services. Strengthening the pathways to legal education for individuals in rural communities is an essential component of addressing rural access to justice.

To build scalable and impactful solutions, it is essential that we truly understand the experiences and unique barriers students from rural areas face. Programs must connect and work together to provide access to mentors, information, financial resources, professional networks, and structured support throughout their journey.

In this webinar, the panelists emphasized that lasting and successful solutions require sustained investment, strategic partnerships, and collaboration among law schools, courts, community organizations, bar associations, and other stakeholders committed to expanding access to justice.

10 Key Takeaways

- ✓ **Rural students are interested in legal careers.** Preliminary LSAC research of recent test takers found that **61% of aspiring law students from rural communities first considered law school before college**, demonstrating strong early interest in the profession.
- ✓ **Geography does not limit ambition.** As one panelist noted, *"Rural or limited access does not mean limited aspiration."* Students from rural communities often envision legal careers long before they encounter the resources needed to pursue them.
- ✓ **Financial concerns remain a major barrier.** Students frequently cite educational costs, debt aversion, and limited financial resources as obstacles to pursuing law school.
- ✓ **Exposure matters.** Many rural students have limited opportunities to interact with lawyers or learn about legal careers. Early and meaningful exposure to the profession can help students envision law as a realistic pathway.
- ✓ **Mentorship and networks are critical.** Students benefit from relationships with attorneys, judges, faculty, advisors, alumni, and peers who can provide guidance, encouragement, and practical support throughout the admission process.

- ✓ **Successful programs provide structured support.** Effective initiatives help students navigate law school admission through activities such as LSAT preparation, law school visits, application guidance, informational interviews, networking opportunities, and mentoring programs.
- ✓ **Collaboration is essential.** Law schools, undergraduate institutions, courts, bar associations, tribal colleges and universities, community organizations, and legal service providers all have a role to play in building stronger pathways to rural legal practice.
- ✓ **Long-term commitment is required.** Successful pipeline programs often involve years of investment, relationship-building, and support extending from early outreach through law school and into professional practice. Because of the nature of rural areas, the number of students served in a specific space or program may not seem as high. However, the impact of the work can resonate greatly.
- ✓ **Students need support at every stage of the journey.** Research shared during the webinar found that while many rural students develop support systems for LSAT preparation, **more than one in five students reported having no one they could rely on for information about the law school application process.**
- ✓ **Effective solutions are community-centered, not one-size-fits-all.** Successful pathways are designed around the unique needs, assets, and challenges of individual communities. Programs are most effective when they are grounded on local relationships, informed by data, and responsive to the students' lived experiences. As barriers evolve, support must evolve as well.

Looking Ahead

The webinar reinforced a clear message: Talented and motivated future lawyers already exist in rural communities. Expanding access to information, mentorship, financial support, and educational opportunities can help ensure that more of these students enter the legal profession and return to serve the communities that need them most. Through continued research, collaboration, and sustained investment, stakeholders can work together to strengthen rural legal pathways and improve access to justice for generations to come.

Resources

- [LSAC Rural Access Page](#)
- [ASU Indian Legal Program](#)
- [ASU Pathway to Law for Tribal Citizens Initiative](#)
- [Nebraska Rural Law Opportunities Program](#)
- [Kansas Rural Justice Initiative Committee Final Report to the Kansas Supreme Court](#)