



Opening the Door: Rural Pathways to Law School

[Transcript]

Voiceover:

LSAC® Multimedia Content The information contained in the multimedia content posted, "Video Content," represents the views and opinions of the individuals that are speaking in the video content, "the Speakers." The speakers may or may not be employees of the Law School Admission Council Inc., LSAC. The views and opinions expressed in the video content represent the views and opinions of the speakers, and may not represent the views and opinions of LSAC. The appearance of video content on any LSAC-operated website is not an endorsement by LSAC or its affiliates of such video content. LSAC does not make any representations or warranties, with respect to the accuracy, applicability, fitness, or completeness of any video content. LSAC hereby disclaims any and all liability to any party for any direct, indirect, implied, special, or any other consequential damages arising directly or indirectly from any use of the video content, which is provided as is and without warranties of any kind.

Voiceover: LSAC.

Announcer:

Rural Access Initiative Webinar Series, "Opening the Door: Rural Pathways to Law School." Moderator, Sudha Setty, President and CEO, LSAC. Panelists, Elizabeth Bodamer, LSAC. Wendy Rohleder-Sook, Fort Hayes State University. Anthony Schutz, University of Nebraska College of Law. Kristen Talbert, ASU, Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law. Recorded Wednesday, August 19, 2026.

Sudha Setty:

Hello, everyone, and welcome. We're so glad you're here with us. My name is Sudha Setty, and I have the pleasure of serving as the president and CEO of the Law School

Admission Council, LSAC. And it's wonderful to welcome so many folks to our webinar today. We had over 200 people register for this, and we're excited by the community of people who's come together today for this conversation. We have law school faculty and staff, judges and court officials, folks representing pathway programs, prelaw advisors, practicing lawyers, and lots of other folks here. And it's wonderful to have this conversation with all of you. As a reminder, this webinar is being recorded and it will be available on our LSAC website within a few days, along with an executive summary of it. If you'd like to refer back to it, we welcome you to do that. And we also welcome you to share it. We know that this is a busy time of year, especially for those on academic calendars that are just getting started, and also for those who just might not have heard about this or, you know, they couldn't calendar it with other things. And the idea here of these webinars, which I'll talk about in a minute, is to bring more people in. So please feel free to share. Feel free to get more people excited and involved in the work that we're doing here. So before we dive into today's panel, I wanted to just offer a very brief outline of what we at LSAC are doing over the coming months and, frankly, coming years and why we're doing it.

Access to justice, as many of you may know, is core to LSAC's mission. Part of our mission is to advance law and justice by promoting access, equity, and fairness in law school admission and to broaden the pathway into legal education, and doing that to support law schools, to support law students, and to support legal education generally. LSAC does a tremendous amount of work with digital marketing, free information, and LSAT® preparation, supporting prelaw advisors and pathway programs, and supporting future lawyers through our own pathway program, Plus, Guided Journey, the largest pathway program into law school in the United States, and through forums and other ways for them to gain more information about law school and what that journey might look like for them. And we know as part of that process that access to justice is a vital question across the board, and students are extraordinarily interested and engaging in this work. And we know that access to justice, there's a gap, a significant gap in every community, and that there are tremendous legal deserts that exist, both in rural communities, in urban communities, and everywhere in between. So knowing that, knowing how widespread this issue is, why are we broadening our work at LSAC in this way to focus on rural access to justice? It's because we know that there are particular factors that affect access to justice, especially in rural communities, and make it especially challenging. More than half of the counties in the United States are considered legal deserts, with few or no lawyers available to represent residents. Rural residents often have to travel long distances to towns or cities where lawyers are available, making legal services less available and more expensive to access. The percentage of rural households living below the national poverty line is 30% higher than the national average, making it harder to afford legal representation, and that's before we even take into account these hurdles of logistics and travel. Rural communities typically have lower broadband coverage, meaning that even accessing legal

representation virtually is a challenge. And as a result, we know that 94% of civil legal issues of low-income rural households go unresolved every year.

On a personal note, I have to say, even growing up in the northeastern United States, which people may not always think of as a rural area, I found very early on the town that I grew up in, which was a small town in Connecticut, had one lawyer in that town. And when I went to be a dean and a faculty member in Western Massachusetts, it was clear to me with conversations with bar associations, with judges and others, that there were not enough lawyers coming from those communities and not enough lawyers going back to serve those communities, the rural communities where there were just very few people who were able to do this work. So this issue hits everywhere across the country, across the United States and Canada, and it's something that we are dedicated to focusing on and doing work on. And I want to just say for a minute, it's clear that there are many organizations and individuals who have been working on this for many years. We are not trying to suggest that this is a new issue or that people haven't been paying attention to it. It's the place where law schools, state Supreme Court justices, bar associations, nonprofits, legal services providers have all been doing different types of work. But what we are trying to do here is build a mechanism to bring some of these efforts together, to get a more complete picture of what those challenges are and what efforts are being made to identify what's working and what's not working in different rural communities, and to connect those who are working on this issue, all the way from this recruitment of prospective law students to supporting them in law school to helping support rural practice so that we can build sustainable coalitions and partnerships that are durable for the long haul.

So that's our goal, to work together with folks from every sector to create a collaborative set of concrete solutions and to help implement widespread execution. So we're joined in this effort by a number of key allies. We want to thank the federal, state, local, and tribal courts who have been working with us, law schools, undergraduate institutions, advocacy groups, and more. And we're grateful for the contributions of the Association of American Law Schools and helping to bring this effort forward. At LSAC, we've also established a working group that includes leaders from many of the key stakeholder organizations and communities, and we're sharing the members of that group with you as well. I want to thank all of those folks and thank especially the Access and Opportunity team at LSAC for all of the work that they've been doing for many, many months to help lead this coalition and this effort that we are undertaking.

So, there isn't time to cover all the work that's underway, but I want to highlight a couple of things. First, LSAC conducted a rural initiative survey earlier this summer to establish a baseline understanding of how law schools recruit students from rural communities, prepare students to practice in those communities, and support graduates in legal careers in rural communities. And the response was strong. We had 69 US law schools,

including 38 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and we also had 10 Canadian law schools. And we're in the process of analyzing that rich set of data that we've gotten. Early findings make clear that many law schools are actively engaged in individual efforts to address access to justice issues in rural communities, and that they are also interested in more collaboration and expansion of those efforts. Of the responding schools, we found that 60% reported that they do recruit specifically to students from rural areas. 49% of them said they have initiatives that prepare law students to work in those communities. And 28% reported that they provide support for recent legal law school graduates who want to practice in rural areas. Schools are actively part of the solution. And on a note of optimism, the vast majority of schools that don't currently have a rural-focused outreach also indicated that they want to broaden their work in this area and they want to engage in collaboration.

Second, LSAC does a lot of research on a lot of topics, thinking about how law students arrive at where they are and how they think about approaching law school. And we are focusing more of that work on rural access in the research that we do. For example, in our upcoming 2025-'26 test taker report, we're examining pathways to law school, including a focus on folks from rural communities. Similarly, our applicant report, which analyzes the last year of applicant data, includes analysis of applicants' geographic backgrounds. What are the challenges that folks from rural communities have found? And what opportunities do we have to help them on their pathway toward law school? So all of this research will help provide an understanding of how aspiring law students from rural communities access legal education in areas that we can all work together to help support that. And finally, we're organizing a national convening on November 6 and 7, hosted at the University of Nebraska College of Law, to bring together law schools, chief justices of state and tribal courts, and key partners in the legal community to develop practical, action-oriented steps to help move this coalition forward. Today's webinar is the first of three designed to help create a shared foundation of understanding as we move forward this fall with all of this programming.

Today is, of course, the first webinar. The next one is on September 16. That one will focus on law school experience and preparing tomorrow's rural lawyers. And on October 14, the third webinar will focus on ways to expand legal services and support those who want to practice in rural areas. So please go to our webpage, register for those webinars, too. There'll be more information about that coming out soon.

So with all of that, thank you so much for letting me frame what our conversation today is a part of. And I want to turn to our terrific panelists today. We have Elizabeth Bodamer, the Senior Director of Research at LSAC. Kristen Talbert, Assistant Director of the Indian Legal Program at ASU Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law. Wendy Rohleder-Sook, the Chair of the Department of Communication Studies, Law and Political Science at Fort Hayes State University and an Assistant Professor of Political

Science and the Director of Prelaw and Legal studies. And Anthony Schutz, Associate Dean for Faculty and the Marvin and Virginia Schmidt Foundation Professor of Agricultural Law at the University of Nebraska College of Law.

Today, we'll talk a little bit about building an understanding of the barriers and opportunities facing students from rural communities and talk a little bit about how institutional practices can help support pathways, promising pathways to students coming to law school, and talk a little bit about how it is that we can center the student perspective on this and think about it in terms of the resources required to do this work and how that kind of manifests in different contexts. So with that, I'd love to turn to our panel and start off kind of with, you know, a broad question, right? If we think about rural access to justice and how we folks from rural communities find their way to law school, what is one thing that you think is important for people to understand about that pathway into law school that perhaps they're not thinking about or that they have misunderstood based on, you know, whatever their conceptions might be? I'd love for this group to share some wisdom on this. And Liz, why don't I start with you and then we'll move over to our other panelists.

Elizabeth Bodamer:

Sounds good. Well, I think one misunderstanding and the research and data world, we love addressing with understandings and myths and assumptions, right? So, one of them is that rural or limited access does not mean limited aspiration. In fact, our preliminary findings suggests the opposite. Aspiring law students who grew up in rural communities are even more likely than their peers to envision themselves pursuing law at an early age.

While about half of aspiring law students who responded to our post-LSAT questionnaire, first considered law school before college, that figure rises to 61% among students from rural communities. And even more striking, more than a third first thought about attending law school before they reached high school. So in our ongoing work, right, we're challenging these myth understandings that geographical constraints don't necessarily equal ambition constraints, right? The desire for a legal career is always there, often years before students encounter resources, mentors, and the pathway to achieve it.

Sudha:

That's terrific. And actually a really optimistic finding, right, to think about how people are thinking about law school early and with eagerness. Kristen, maybe we can turn to you. What's maybe a common misconception or a piece of information people should know about this pathway into law school?

Kristen Talbert:

I think one common misconception is that when people go to law school, that they won't return. And in our community, a lot of people want to return back to their tribal community to work for their people.

Sudha:

Thank you. That's a terrific insight. Anthony, how about you? What's your thought on this?

Anthony Schutz:

Well, given the low numbers of lawyers in rural places, like one of the challenges I think we run into is exposure to this as a viable career opportunity, especially in those adolescent years when people, they may not develop their sense of who they can be, but they kind of develop a sense of who they're not going to be, right? And if you've never seen a lawyer, if you've never had any experience with what they do, and it's very difficult to sort of like create that spark later on. And so that's one challenge I think that we run into in rural places that's a little bit different than the challenge we run into maybe in some other places.

Sudha:

Thanks. Wendy?

Wendy Rohleder-Sook:

I think that one of the misconceptions may relate to academic credentials and whether students are prepared for law school. I think students have a lot of opportunities, whether they're maybe attending a rural college or someplace that's in a little bit more of a metropolitan area, that they're motivated and they want to expand their knowledge and their skills to be prepared and ready for the academic rigors of law school and a challenging career like practicing law.

Sudha:

So I appreciate that, Wendy, and I want to stick with you and maybe ask you the next question here, too. So you're talking a little bit about kind of where they see themselves or how they can access this. You've spent so much of your career working with advising students. You're maybe often one of the first people, right, that students are able to articulate like this desire to go to law school, too, with the kind of seeking of help. So what are those questions, the concerns, the barriers that you hear most from these students from rural communities as they're thinking about this question of law school?

Wendy:

Yeah, I think one of the most significant has to do with finances. And, you know, to Liz's points that she made earlier in terms of, you know, kind of socioeconomic status, I see students in my school who, you know, have limited financial means. It's one of the reasons that they selected the school for college. So they have real concerns about taking out a lot of debt. They tend to be a little bit more debt-averse maybe than other students are. So those are significant considerations. I think there may also be a little bit of an imposter syndrome from students thinking, can I really do this? Is this for me? I don't have any lawyers in my family. I haven't interacted with lawyers. I'm not sure exactly what they do. And I don't know if I can do that. Do I have the skills in the background and the ambition to make it happen? So those are some of the things that I hear from students and hopefully through, you know, my advising programs and talking with students that they start to realize, yeah, people who go to law school are just like me and I can meet those challenges and aim and have those as goals.

Sudha:

So I appreciate this. I mean, some of the stuff that you're talking about, right, these are real and significant challenges, the financial piece of it, the imposter syndrome piece of it. And we know that those cut across all communities, right? It's not just focused on rural communities where aspiring law students have these barriers and these concerns. You know, I'm thinking about Anthony's comment earlier about like not seeing someone who is a lawyer or even understanding what that work is. Do you feel like, you know, when you're working with students from rural communities, that is a specific issue that comes up in that context too?

Wendy:

Yeah, I think so. And I think, you know, through some of my work, I try to get students to the courthouse. So we will go and observe. We'll have attorneys come in and talk with them so that they can actually understand what it is that that work looks like. I, you know, had a student yesterday who said, I'm really maybe interested in estate planning. So can you help me maybe get some more information there? So, I have a contact in town, I said, "Hey, would you be willing to sit down and do an informational interview with her?" So, getting them, making those connections for them or helping them make those connections, I think is really critical. But not knowing where to go or not knowing where to start, I think for a lot of students is a real challenge. So outreach becomes really important to make those connections with students and build those advising and mentoring relationships.

Sudha:

Absolutely. Kristen, I imagine that some of the stuff Wendy is talking about resonates with you and the students you work with. Through your work with the Indian Legal

Program at Arizona State and the Pathway to Law for a Tribal Citizens Initiative, you've helped create tremendous opportunity for Indigenous students who are interested in legal careers and attending law school. Can you share a little bit more about that lens of the work, about maybe culturally relevant pathways that kind of supports that are necessary there to make sure that, again, if we think about Wendy's comments about imposter syndrome or whatever else that we're helping people on that journey.

Kristen:

Yeah, and I also agreed with Wendy about the financial aspect of the challenge. I think that's very real. So our program is free of charge. You're just in-charge of your own travel to get there. And it's a traveling program. What we do is we actually teach the students how to apply to law school. So they come from across the country and they have access to various professors, admissions professionals, and people who work in the law community like lawyers and tribal judges, things like that. So they get to see career opportunities with a law degree. And then we also have them take a mock LSAT. So they know what to expect when they actually take an LSAT. Sorry, when they take an LSAT. And I think for them, a lot of them like the connections and the networking that they make with each other, but also with the staff and the faculty that they meet.

Sudha:

Right. And that makes a lot of sense to help see themselves, right, in these spaces, which is, of course, really important. Anthony, you know, you hail from rural Nebraska and you now Lead the Rural Opportunities, Law Opportunities Program at Nebraska Law. I wonder if you could share a little bit about, you know, in your experience, what factors are influencing rural students as seeing law school as something that connects to those rural communities, that they see it as a viable career that they can bring back to those communities or not? I mean, I'm curious as to your with your experience, what you see in that space.

Anthony:

Yeah, so I think some of it is exposure, right? And that exposure can happen at, you know, different times throughout their life. For me, individually, I didn't really learn of law school as a viable career opportunity for me until a professor in undergrad sort of pulled me aside in my junior year and said, "Hey, have you ever really thought about law school?" And it's that sort of like ad hoc, like one-off possibility that the program that I'm a part of is trying to kind of guard against that being sort of the only way in which people who've never really thought about it get to it. So with that in mind, you know, a lot of what we do, and I'm speaking from a law school's perspective, right? A lot of what we do is support our undergraduate institutions that are part of the program and give them programming that allows them to expose their students to the law school. So students

come and visit the law school. Our admissions team talks to those students about applications and the LSAT. We work to fund LSAT preparation and things along those lines in order to give students a good sense in undergrad of what rural practice entails, what law schools really like, so that they can make a more informed choice about whether this is the sort of career path that they want to pursue. The thing I worry a little bit about is whether we are reaching far enough back into those students' lives, right? Should we be in middle school? Should we be a part of Constitution Day, right? Should we be doing all of those sorts of things in those schools in order to make sure that the pipeline is being filled, not with students that would have already sort of been exploring that pipeline at the outset, but new students that haven't ever really thought about it. And where you find those students is sort of one of the difficult propositions. Do you need to go all the way to middle school? Can you do it in high school? Can you do it in undergrad? And if you do it in undergrad, when should you do it? You know, first semester, maybe third semester. Are we looking at juniors? Is in the business college? You know, where exactly are these people in the university that we could attract?

Sudha:

I think you raise a really important point. I mean, dovetails with the research point that Liz brought up earlier about how early it is that people start thinking about law school. And, you know, I think we spend a lot of time at LSAC thinking about, well, for that population of folks, how are we reaching them earlier? And to your point, making sure that if they have like an idea that they're not kind of self-directing away from that before we would even reach one of the programs that would kind of actively help them into law school. And I think that, you know, perhaps the rural area is one in which it's a more profound challenge because of just people's not being, you know, in kind of physical proximity to others who are doing this kind of work on a regular basis, right, so there's some challenges there. Go ahead.

Anthony:

I'd add just a little bit to like the return on the investment is sort of difficult, a difficult proposition to like, are we really going to send somebody to, you know, a K through 12 with a total of 200 students to census, right? And how many of those are we actually going to be able to reach out to over the course of a given year? That's one thing to go to a high school that has 2,000 students, right? That's another thing to go to a town that has a graduating class of 15 or 30, or 35. And those are some of the areas that are the most in need. So it's a high cost endeavor in some ways.

Sudha:

Absolutely. And I think that's well said. So Liz, I'll turn it back to you. You know, the research that you've been engaged in, again, for lots of different types of students, right,

has focused on access to legal education, the sense of belonging, the sense of, you know, how they see themselves in the space of law school. So from what you've learned through your research, through your work at LSAC, you know, how do we get a better sense of what influences these folks as they consider whether law school is even a path for them?

Elizabeth:

So one of the big things that we have seen over and over again is that access to support opportunities, networks and resources, this all builds confidence, agency and follow through. And it's something we've been seeing with our very own LSAC Plus, Guided Journey pathway program students. The thing is that for most people, they see themselves in law school. This is true for everyone across different journeys. This is actually true that we're finding preliminarily for aspiring law students from rural communities. And so, they are just as likely as their peers, folks from rural communities, they are just as likely as their peers to know that they belong in law school. They know that this is a realistic choice. Where we start to see things diverging is their awareness of what people assume about them. So, for example, about a quarter of aspiring law students from rural communities said that people would be surprised to see someone like them be successful in law school. This is about 40% higher compared to their other peers. They see themselves in school and law school. That's not the issue. To echo kind of Wendy's earlier comments, the issue here is about the concrete support, the tangible resources, the structured programming, the skills development, the network outreach to cultivate these students' ambition and to carry them through and into law school orientation and beyond.

Sudha:

So I think that's a great theme to pick up on. So, you know, my next set of questions for each of you will focus a little bit on this. Like, what are those interventions, those pathways that are actually successful in this space? At least a few, I think all three of you at different points have mentioned what Liz is talking about, this kind of personal touch, right, this kind of, you know, hand-to-hand outreach, for lack of a better term, to get people or Anthony, someone talking to you at one point being like, hey, law school is a viable pathway for you and can help and change your mindset about it. So, you know, maybe, Kristen, I'll start with you, right, you focus a lot on educational access, on kind of getting students to think of themselves as leaders, right, thinking of them, broadening that kind of notion of how it is that they would see this pathway to law school work for them. Can you talk a little bit about that? Like, how does that help them kind of make that turn into saying, "Yes, I belong in this space?"

Kristen:

I think as previously talked about, you have to see it to know it. So, you know, when they see another attorney that looks like them, they're more able to see themselves as being that. And I think that it's important for them to see that because, again, it's imposter syndrome. And a lot of them don't know that they're good enough to do that. I think I also wanted to add, we try to focus on getting undergrads who are sophomores and juniors interested in our Pathway to Law program because we find that that's when they can turn their GPA around if it's not great, and they want to go to law school. We find that that's the sweet spot where they can turn it around and make that change and find that path to law school.

Sudha:

So I appreciate this because it sounds like what you're saying is it's not only that kind of personal touch and that, you know, role modeling piece, but it is also thinking about the timing of it and when it is that the message is going to hit correctly to like engage a student and thinking about this as a future path for them. Wendy, what about you? You've talked a little bit about this outreach. Like, what does that look like? How do we think about effective ways for institutions, right, to build bridges across stakeholders, right? Whether it's, you know, reaching into an earlier space to get, you know, folks in high school, like teachers, whether it's getting lawyers or judges involved, right? And is that really through the kind of, well, you're interested in estate planning, so we're going to make this one-to-one connection? Or are there like programmatic structural, things we can think about as we try to help the folks who are listening and all of us think about, you know, how to strengthen this pathway?

Wendy:

Yeah, so just to give a little context, I'm in a community of about 20,000 people, and our institution has about 4,000 on-campus undergraduates. We also have a large online population, but most of this work then is centered on our on-campus population. I've built a lot of relationships across the borrower community in my community to implement some different programs. So we do, I work with the county attorney and we do a lot of presentation for seventh graders at the local middle school. And that reaches about 250 students, but we do them in small groups because that's what's most effective for them to get some interaction with us. We've made tweaks over time to make it more engaging for students. And again, to start planning those seats. They're seventh graders. So, you know, the first class that we did, they graduated last year. So it's a long game that you're playing. But hopefully, they may remember that presentation that one day, and that may have been the first spark of that interest. I also have been partnering with Washburn Law School, which is in our state, I'm in Kansas, and for a Legal Minds Academy. And that's targeted for high school students in a kind of a one-day program, introduces them to the legal profession, does some hands-on engaging activities, have lunch with local attorneys and judges.

Again, kind of another step or piece in that to reach maybe a larger group of students. And then, you know, kind of when they're on campus, I do a lot to make sure that students are getting regular information from me. I send a prelaw update every Monday, and I constantly am adding students to that list. So they're seeing my name and they're seeing opportunities there. And then, of course, I teach classes. So I have students there who have, you know, selected, hey, maybe I'm interested in law, cultivating those relationships. And then, you know, a lot of my work does happen one-on-one with students who will come in and say, here's what I'm thinking. Is this feasible? What does this look like? To really just try to better understand what the path might look like for them. But it is, I mean, it is resource intensive. And to Anthony's point earlier, you know, how do you measure success? And that can be really challenging. I'm one person and can't do everything that I would really love to do. But tapping and relying on relationships across our community has just been critical to do this work because lots of people are interested and lots of people want to volunteer their time and have really made these programs feasible.

Sudha:

I appreciate that. And I like what you're talking about, that there's different interventions at different ages and stages, right, that goes to Kristen's point about timing as well. Anthony, I wonder if you would reflect on this too, right, your Rural Law Opportunities Program is, I think, cited by many as an example of a very intentional pipeline between undergraduate institutions and legal education. So we're talking about that timing of undergraduates. Can you tell us some pieces of what makes that particular pathway strong or, you know, I'm assuming that there has been some trial and error and some revision over time to make it what it is like maybe some lessons learned for us.

Anthony:

Yeah, and for those that aren't familiar with it, so I'm sort of speaking from the law school perspective, which I've mentioned before. But the way that this works is the students that are part of the RLOP program get four years of free undergraduate education. They're scholarship funded at Kearney, Nebraska, Chadron, Nebraska, Wayne, Nebraska, and Peru State College. So we've got three state colleges and one university that are part of our undergraduate schools. And remember that those schools are in rural places already. So a student that's likely to go to one of those places is a student that's probably already got some sort of a connection to a rural place. The carrot, I think, or the thing that really helps the undergraduate schools do many of the things that have been talked about already in terms of recruiting students is the promise that students get that are part of the program that they'll get sort of automatic admission to the University of Nebraska College of Law if they meet certain thresholds with regard to the LSAT in their undergraduate GPA. That enables the undergraduate schools to go out and recruit students into the program. And a lot of our pipeline is sort of established

at the undergraduate admission stage, right? So these are 17, 18, 19-year-old students, not so much. We don't identify as many students in this program in the third or fourth or fifth semester of undergrad. We're working to sort of improve that a little bit because, you know, a 17-year-old is, you know, a little bit different than a 20-year-old. But that's sort of what we do at the law schools. We're providing support to the undergraduate schools that are really establishing this pipeline, and those folks are fundamental to it.

The support that we provide is in terms of, you know, I go out to, I visit each one of these schools every year and provide some sort of programming. So they see me, the associate dean of faculty and this professor, come to their school four times over the course of their undergraduate career. They also visit the law school four times over the course of their undergraduate career and see the Nebraska Supreme Court, the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals, sit in law school classes, talk to our admissions team and all of that. So by the time they come to law school, four years after we first established contact in the RLOP program, they have a very good understanding of how the law school works and what they can expect. They also, through the programming that the undergraduate schools create, have a very strong understanding of what rural practices is really like. And a lot of that comes from the undergraduate schools themselves and the programming that they develop. So that's kind of the way our pipeline works. It really starts at that undergraduate admission stage. We get them through undergrad with very little or no student debt, and we give them automatic admission to the University of Nebraska Law School, provided, of course, they meet those thresholds with regard to the LSAT and GPA. And that allows the undergraduate schools to really go out and market this program that is going to persist for, you know, the next seven years of their educational lives.

Sudha:

Thank you for sharing that. And I think, you know, one of the things to reflect on here is we started off talking about financial need, right, being one of the key barriers that exists. That's rural, urban, everywhere in between, but certainly for these communities. And so, I appreciate what you're saying about like, this is a resource intensive endeavor that you're talking about in terms of making sure that those students graduate with very little debt and have access to school. And I want to circle back to that in a minute. But Liz, I also wonder if you would want to share at this point some reflections from the research side of it. You know, thinking about, like, you've learned a lot about what kinds of interventions on the way to law school might be helpful, might be supportive. I wonder if you could share a couple of reflections about that.

Elizabeth:

Absolutely. And I love this panel because everything we've learned is echoed by everyone. So the evidence tells us that the most effective interventions meet students

where they are. And Wendy, Kristen, and Anthony have highlighted that over and over again. By the time many students from rural communities decide to take the LSAT, they have often been considering law school for years based off of our preliminary data. The question is not whether they have ambition. As I said before, the question is whether they have access to support, information, and opportunities they need at each stage of the journey. So what we have consistently seen in the research is that successful programs are not one-size-fits-all. They identify very specific barriers, address them in ways that are responsive to the community. They're rooted in local relationships, and they're grounded in both the data and research and the lived experiences of students. So in other words, the most effective interventions that we've seen start with the human experience, but then are also informed by the evidence. And so I often think about the difference between a feel-good program and a do-good program. Do-good programs address barriers by providing that support at the moment students need it the most.

So let's do a little example kind of thing here. Some of our preliminary data is showing that most aspiring law students from rural communities who completed the LSAT had an accountability group that helped them keep them on track during the test preparation. Yet more than one in five told us that they currently have no one they can rely on for information about the law school application process itself. So the contrast here is important. It tells us that broad access to information is not enough, right? The student need changes and in some cases, compounds at every milestone. So students may have found the support necessary to prepare for the LSAT, but then they're already identifying a gap as they move to the next step, right, to apply in a law school. But what I want to be clear about here is that barriers are not necessarily sequential. Some overlap. They intersect across the journey. Some are interrelated, right? People still experience poverty, emergency. Life doesn't happen because a student has decided, I'm going to pursue this dream. All this to say is that barriers should not be addressed in isolation. To echo what everyone else has said, this is why we need collaboration. It is why LSAC is bringing all these folks together through these webinars and the convening so that we can work together, because that's where we have the biggest impact. Our data is shown over and over again, barriers are systematic. So our solutions and interventions should be systematic as well.

Sudha:

I appreciate that, Liz. And I think you've, you know, it's sobering, right? It's both, you know, exciting, but it's also sobering, right, this kind of outlook on how these programs need to be built. So, right, part of the reason for this conversation is to help the folks who are listening, for all of us who are involved in this conversation and this work, to really think about what it is that we can do, right, how it is that we can work together and work better. And so, I wonder if the panelists could reflect on this for a minute. You know, let's assume that I think probably correctly that many of the people who are here

want to do more, right, in the realm of rural access. They want to either build a program or take a program that is working well and see if it's replicable in their context or whatever else. So what advice do you have, right, for folks who are in that space where they're like, we want to broaden our pathway into law school. We want to do that at our own institution. Where should they get started? What should they be thinking about? What considerations should they bear in mind? And Wendy, why don't we start with you?

Wendy:

Sure. I think first and foremost, it's build those relationships. So it's figuring out who are the right people to start talking with and building connections with. And how can you then, you know, collect resources together and put those programs into play? I think there are, you know, a lot of attorneys, I think, who have an interest, but we also know that they're really strapped for time, and especially in rural areas, right? There aren't enough of them, so they have more than enough to do. So, if you have someone who can help coordinate and provide some of that administrative help to have things kind of set up and ready to go, and here's, you know, what your piece is and make it manageable for them, I think that's really helpful. And, you know, everything that I've done has happened because I've had those relationships. And some of them just happen to have. I mean, they just happen. And then I come back to them, you know, years later for something else or another idea. So, I think that there's a lot of interest out there. But building those relationships and identifying, I guess, who those people are or who those groups are, I think is a great first step.

Sudha:

Terrific. Kristen, what are your thoughts on that?

Kristen:

I agree with that totally. You know, with our Pathway program, collaborate with TCUs and other universities to make it a success. It's not just ASU. And so I agree that collaborating is a great tool to have. I would also add that maybe going for grants and looking for funding because it's very expensive and we are always, our program's always looking for granting opportunities.

Sudha:

Absolutely. And Anthony, how about you in terms of what people should be considering? And I appreciate that some folks have been writing in the Q&A, which is great. I know we're not going to be able to get to everyone's questions, but I want to like ask Anthony, you know, there have been a question or two about asking for details about the program that you run. How is it, like we've talked about financial constraints,

how is this program that you run funded, right? So I don't I wonder if you could address that as part of your response as well.

Anthony:

The funding at the undergraduate level is, it has a lot to do with scholarship aid, right? Which is a, you know, that's a whole big box that we could unpack. And how much of that has been sort of repurposed from other scholarships to these scholarships? How much of it is remissions that is just foregone revenue? And how much of it is funded? Like those are all very difficult questions that we run into. But yeah, I mean, you need money, right, to do this sort of thing in one form or another. And so, that's a big challenge. So two things that I'd like to sort of stress, I think Wendy sort of hit on one of them, which is it's really like there's people, like when I talk about my undergraduate institutions, I'm always very careful to say it's Kate and it's Chuck and it's Rachel and it's Rachel. And it's, you know, it's people that are very busy who take the time to do this because they care about it. And those relationships aren't like institutional relationships so much as their personal relationships, right, to try to really maintain and leverage.

The other thing that I just mentioned is, you know, we've been doing this program since 2017. And we're just now at the point where we're getting, you know, six, seven, eight students graduated from law school. This sort of a pipeline that starts at the undergraduate level and culminates at the end of law school. It's a long timeframe. And so changes that you make sort of midstream in order to figure out whether they were effective or not, it might be five, six years down the road. So you got to sort of be prepared, I think, for the duration and the longevity of a program like this and be prepared to see returns and then note that like if you make, not really a mistake, if you identify a thing that needs change, you might not see benefits of that until much further down the road. We are now seeing a larger interest in having more students at the beginning of the undergraduate pipeline. But those changes that we've made in the last two years won't be seen as effective, I guess, in terms of having people in rural places practicing law for seven years down the road. And so it's a long time horizon associated with it.

Sudha:

Right, so I appreciate this. And I want to highlight two things that all three of you have said that I think echoes what Liz has been talking about, too, which is it's the financial resources which are key, right? We've talked about, you know, state legislative decisions, private donors, grant making, all of these spaces to get support. And maybe if I can infer a little bit, all the relationships that you all have worked so hard to build are helpful in that process, too. But I think it's also this other question of longevity and commitment, right? It's the kind of idea of planting seeds and that it takes a long time to grow them, right? You're talking about folks at the start of an undergraduate pathway

program. You're talking about seven years minimum by the time they come back and practice in a rural community.

So when we're talking about the finances, we're talking about an investment too that the commitment has to carry through for many years. We're in a world of instant gratification and this is not it, right? It's a different type of conversation. And to go back to an earlier point, if we're digging even deeper, if we're talking about investing in middle schools or high schools, that pathway is a much longer one. And none of that even accounts for non-traditional students, right, the ones who might take a break at one point or another in their education to work, or for family responsibilities, or whatever else and then come back to law school. So I guess, you know, I feel like I'm just reflecting what I've heard from all of you in terms of some of the challenges. And I think the serious conversations that people have to have if they're like, well, we want to support rural practice. Well, what does that mean, right? It's both the finances and the commitment of time to see these things come to fruition.

So let me ask another question about this piece when it comes to scaling or transplanting, right, like if you didn't have to think about the resources question as kind of the first one, what do you think a successful, what of the current initiatives that you all work on is kind of the piece that you would say, hey, go take this and replicate it elsewhere because this is really workable. It's something that you can see would lift a significant number of folks on that student pathway. Again, if money were no object in this and you had the will of people to do it, what would that be? And I'll start with whoever wants to. I mean, I'm asking you all to dream optimistic.

Wendy:

Yeah, I think I would, you know, I think some of the programming that we've talked about, I think is, it's not hard things, but it's mostly it's people resources. So if, you know, that was fine, then gosh, there are a million things that you can do with undergraduate students to help them with exploration, with preparation, with the application process. I think to Liz's point earlier about accountability groups, that's the area that's on my list for this year is resurrecting our prelaw society and getting students together because I've seen that. Having a group that's all going through the same thing at the same time, for them to be able to connect with each other and hold each other accountable, I think is critical. So I think that there are a number of, you know, in a well kind of financed or a resourced prelaw advising program, you can hit on a number of these different things and programs within it to really reach out and connect these students early and get them that the resources and the help that they need.

Sudha:

Terrific. Anthony?

Anthony:

One thing that I'm particularly proud of in our program is I think these students, when they matriculate to law school, they know what they're getting into, right? And they know it in a sense that I think not all of our students really fully appreciate when they come into law school because of the programming that the law schools provided to the undergraduate institutions. And I would encourage folks that are interested in developing these sorts of programs to really get that. I mean, one thing that we don't want to see as a student who we've sort of talked into rural practice, coming to law school and then realizing that, oh man, this is not really what I wanted. And we just, by our program design, like we don't have those kinds of problems. It is like, so are you selling law school? Are you selling rural practice? Or are you like trying to really sort of cultivate and ensure that the students who come are the most likely to return because they are going into their eyes sort of wide open? And we've really strived to do that over the course of the program. And so that's one thing that I would replicate. I'm, well, particularly proud of in terms of what we've done.

Sudha:

Perfect, and Kristen?

Kristen:

Yeah, I think for us, our Pathway to Law program is the doorway to law school. We teach you the application process. And, you know, if someone at the end of the program is like, this isn't for me, I don't want to go to law school. That's a win because we just save a bunch of money. And then from there, once they go through the application process, they get accepted to law school. We also work with the American Indian Law Center, which has the Prelaw Summer Institute, PLSI. And there they do basically a semester of law school before their 1L year. So they know what to expect when they go to law school. And then once the students get to law school here at ASU, we give them mentors. So when they come in as a 1L, they get a 2L mentor, a 3L mentor, a faculty mentor, and an alumni mentor. And our hope is that when they have questions, they can go to any one of them and have their questions answered so they don't feel like out of place or lost.

Sudha:

That's terrific. And I think, you know, we've hit on some really important themes here in terms of structured support, intentionality, long-term commitment, and then the resources to support that work, right, these are common themes through all of it. I will say, just looking at the Q&A, you all have answered some of the questions that have come up here. But the theme that we did not get to in this panel is the finances on the other side, right? The piece about what does it look like for rural practice? Is that a

sustainable life for me? Is it viable? Not just with, you know, some folks are asking about the debt coming out of law school. And some folks are asking about like, well, what does my career look like? How does that come out for 20 years or 30 years if I'm working in rural practice? And I think, so I guess I have two thoughts on this as we are kind of coming closer to time, and I'd welcome any of our panelists to weigh in very briefly on it. One is kind of a logistical note. This is what our October 14 panel will be about. So I'm encouraging everyone to tune in for that third webinar, which is focusing on how do you make rural practice viable and sustainable for people. And so for those folks who are asking that question, please join us for that.

But the other piece that I'm thinking about is that this is something that needs to come up at the stages that all of you talked about, right, prelaw advising has to be able to help, not necessarily answer this question, but at least start that conversation with them. As Kristen said, if they ultimately get through and decide it's not right for them, right, they need to do that with, and Anthony said, you don't want to surprise people, right, like this is what you want to do with kind of eyes wide open. Any like brief reflections that any of you want to make on that point in terms of advising them for career longevity or viability of this career path? And I just welcome if any of you and if the answer is no, that's okay, but if there's anyone who has a thought on it, Anthony, you unmuted, so I'm going to take that as a yes.

Anthony:

And I do hope the October panel sort of like gets into this, right? But, you know, from all the indications that we have, there's clients and there's there's money to be made. And there's like you can have a good legal career in a rural place. The challenges, I think, have a lot more to do with what are the schools? What are the hospitals? What's the elder care look like? Are you going to be able to find child care? So like rural professional development is rural development, right, more generally. And so there are a lot of things that are sort of headwinds in terms of getting people into professional practices in rural places that don't have as much to do with the practice of law as they do with living in rural places. And so those are, I think, some of the like larger headwinds. And then to the extent we're talking about, you know, there's existing work out there. There's existing work, right? But I don't know that we've ever regarded sort of the existing supply of rural lawyers to be sufficient to meet some of the access to justice needs that we're talking about.

So if we're talking about just maintaining a system that exists, we would have to ask ourselves whether or not that's going to be sufficient, or if there are further concerns that we're trying to address. And to the extent there's further concerns, then that's a further challenge, right? What do we do with guardians ad litem? And what do we do with juvenile justice? Some of the family law stuff is not being met because, you know, even though there's clients, there's just not the sort of returns on that kind of practice that we

would want to see in rural places. So there's a lot of things to consider once you sort of open this box into rural places.

Sudha:

Absolutely. Any other reflections?

Wendy:

Yeah, I would just add one to that. I think a lot of states are looking at this issue. I sat on a statewide committee in Kansas a couple years ago that addressed this, I'm now on the standing committee. And there are recommendations included funding from the legislature for loan repayment assistance programs. And that was successful for us. So, part of it is bringing an awareness to the issue. So thank you to LSAC for doing this. And I think that that's been helpful even in our local communities. I think our local community has a better understanding because we've had folks who've been working on this issue and they recognize this is a problem. And how can we, you know, advocate for the resources to help address it?

Sudha:

Terrific. Well, this has been such a great conversation. I want to thank all four of our panelists for the wonderful perspectives and experience that you brought. And I feel like we could have talked for another, you know, hour or two about all of the issues that were raised here. But like I said, this is a good start to a really important conversation that we're having. I want to thank all of you for that. And for everyone else, please join us. share this webinar with folks, but also join us for the ones in September and October, again, talking about law school programming and how law schools are working to support that rural pathway. And then the one in October that really is going to focus on practice and support in those in that stage of one's career and beyond. So thanks so much, everyone, and I appreciate your engagement.

Announcer:

Visit [LSAC.org](https://lsac.org) to learn more.