Strengthening the U.S. Rural Law Pathway Brief

Insights About Law School Efforts to Recruit, Prepare, and Support Rural Lawyers

75% of responding U.S. law schools reported at least **one active initiative to increase access** to justice for rural communities.

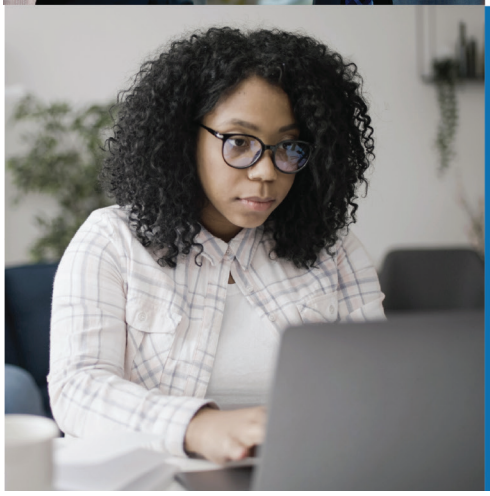








Most law schools *without* rural initiatives are interested in **learning more about developing** and implementing rural-focused efforts and programs.



63% of schools with at least one rural initiative reported at least **one external collaboration** to facilitate their work.



This brief is a preliminary overview of the survey findings. The final analysis is forthcoming in a comprehensive report.

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Introduction

Rural communities across the United States face a persistent and well-documented shortage of practicing attorneys, with 41% of counties considered "legal deserts," that is, there are few or no lawyers available to provide legal services to residents. (Refer to the 2020 ABA Profile of the Legal Profession or the new Legal Services Corporation report, "Justice Where We Live: Promising Practices from Rural Communities.") Law schools are uniquely positioned to help address the growing access to justice needs by recruiting, preparing, and supporting graduates' transitions to practice in rural communities. However, little is documented about the extent to which law schools are currently investing in rural-focused initiatives across the U.S.

LSAC is working to tackle today's challenges facing rural access to justice in collaboration with the Association of American Law Schools (AALS), the University of Nebraska College of Law, and key stakeholders in the legal community, including chief justices, law schools, tribal courts, state and local bar associations, and national and community organizations. As part of this continued commitment and to best understand and support these efforts, **LSAC administered the Law School Rural Initiatives Survey**. These findings will serve as a baseline for future efforts.

The survey was designed to explore and assemble information about law school rural initiatives, establish the first comprehensive baseline of rural-focused work across law schools and to provide a clearer picture of how legal education is responding to the needs of rural communities. (The forthcoming report will include results from Canadian schools.) The survey, administered during the spring of 2026, asked schools about 1) initiatives to recruit students from rural areas; 2) initiatives to train law students to practice in rural areas; 3) initiatives to support recent graduates' practice in rural areas; 4) interest in developing and implementing new initiatives; 5) how initiatives are funded; and 6) collaborations that make the work possible.

A total of 69 U.S. ABA-accredited law schools (35%) across 38 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico participated in this inaugural survey. Responses reflect a deep commitment to improving access to legal services in rural communities and a clear need for greater resources, support, and knowledge-sharing to address ongoing rural access to justice challenges. This brief provides a first look at the survey findings, offering an overview of how law schools are working to address rural access to justice challenges by recruiting students from rural areas, preparing them to practice in rural communities, and supporting graduates pursuing legal careers in rural locales. It also serves as a starting point for identifying opportunities to further support, develop, and build efforts in an even more coordinated and effective way. A forthcoming report will explore the survey results in greater detail, with key findings highlighted below.

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The Pathway to Rural Legal Practice at a Glance

The following *key high-level insights* reveal schools' commitment to improving access to legal services in rural communities and a continuing need for greater resources, support, and knowledge sharing to address rural legal access needs in the U.S.

- 75% of participating U.S. law schools (52) reported at least one active rural initiative focused on strengthening the rural legal pathway at three stages of the journey: (1) recruiting students from rural communities, (2) preparing students for rural practice, or (3) supporting recent graduates who pursue legal careers in rural communities.
  - 61% are working to recruit students from rural communities.
  - 57% offer programs and resources that prepare students for rural practice.
  - 30% provide support for graduates pursuing legal careers in rural areas.
- Of all schools that reported any initiatives addressing rural access, 27% of them have multiple initiatives spanning the entire pathway, from recruitment through support for entry into rural legal practice.
- The majority of law schools *without* rural initiatives are interested in learning more about developing and implementing rural-focused efforts and programs.
  - 30% are interested in learning more about initiatives recruiting students from rural communities.
  - 30% are interested in learning more about initiatives that prepare students for rural practice.
  - 46% are interested in learning more about initiatives that support graduates pursuing legal careers in rural areas.
- Collaboration is critical for rural initiatives operated by law schools. 63% of schools with at least one rural initiative reported at least one external collaboration to facilitate their work, and 48% indicated they had more than one collaboration.
- Rural initiatives are funded in a variety of ways. 54% of law schools with at least one rural initiative used internal funding only, 13% used external funding only, and 27% used a combination of internal and external funding.

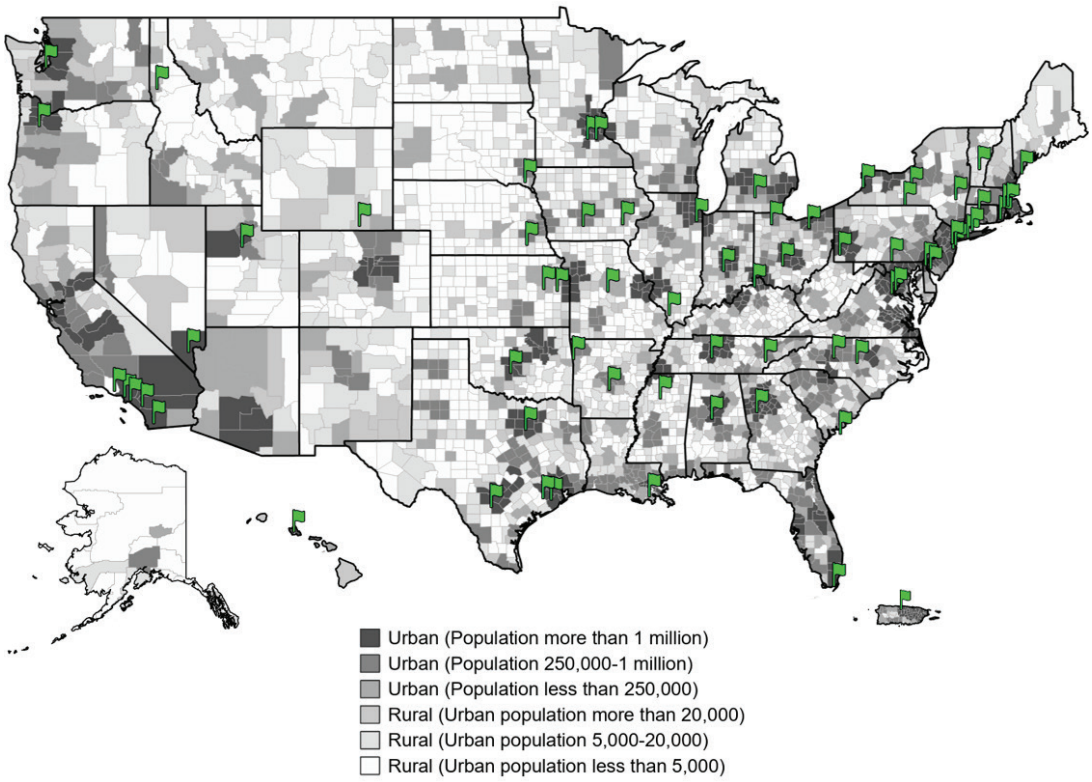
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Law School Rural Initiatives Landscape

Mapping Participating Schools

This brief is based on the 69 responding law schools located throughout the continental United States, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico (Figure 1). These schools represent all ten LSAC regions and reflect the geographic distribution of the 198 U.S. law schools accredited by the Council of the ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar (ABA Council) (Figure 2). (The LSAC regions and their states are: Northwest [AK, OR, WA]; Far West [CA, HI, NV]; Mountain West [AZ, CO, ID, MT, NM, UT, WY]; Midwest [IA, KS, MO, ND, NE, SD]; South Central [AR, LA, OK, TX]; Great Lakes [IL, IN, MI, MN, OH, WI]; New England [CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT]; Northeast [NJ, NY, PA]; Mid-South [Washington, D.C.; DE; KY; MD; NC; TN; VA; WV]; and Southeast [AL, FL, GA, MS, SC, PR]). Response rates varied by LSAC region, ranging from lows of 21% and 23% in the Mid-South and Southeast, respectively, to highs of 48% and 58% in the Northeast and Midwest, respectively. The two regions with the lowest response rates were both in the South and, together, account for 30% of member schools but only 19% of respondents. Given that legal deserts are heavily concentrated in the South and Appalachia, lower participation from these regions highlights an opportunity to expand this survey and work in the future. For the inaugural survey, the responding schools are geographically representative of the larger landscape.

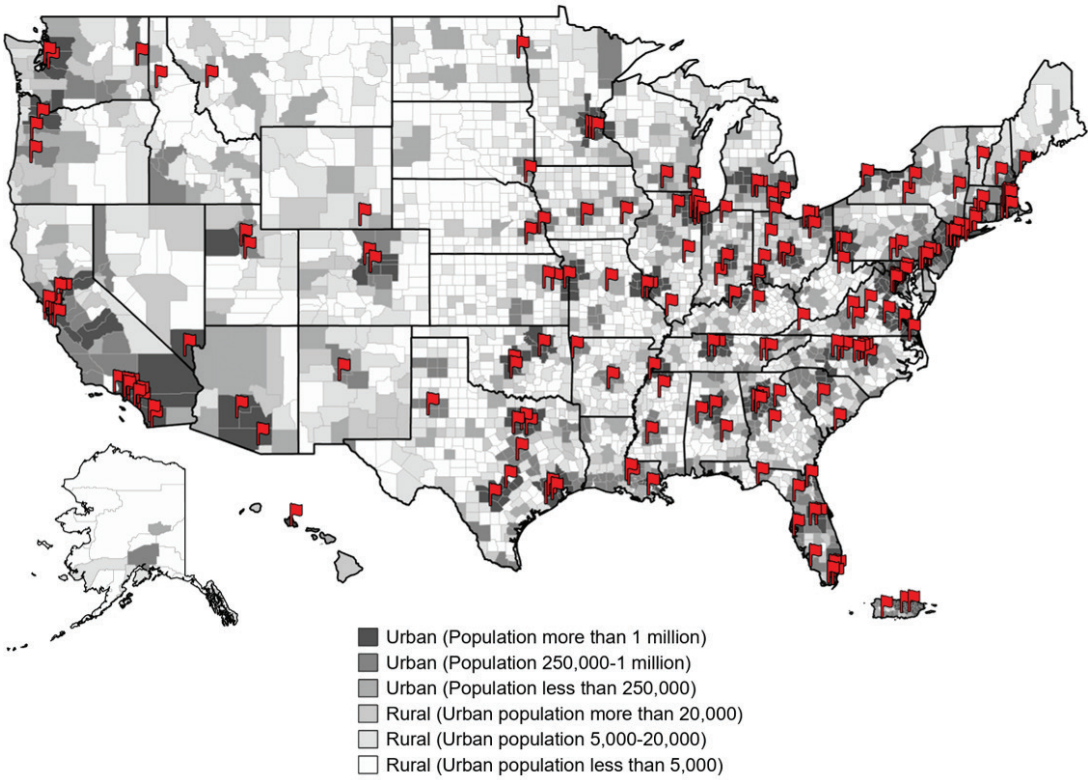
Figure 1. Location of Participating Schools and Distribution of Rural and Urban Counties in the U.S. and Puerto Rico



Source: 2026 LSAC Law School Rural Initiatives Survey Data and U.S. Census Bureau. 69 U.S. law schools participated in the survey.

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Figure 2. 198 U.S. ABA-Accredited Member Law Schools



Source: 2026 LSAC Law School Rural Initiatives Survey Data Schools and U.S. Census Bureau. Law schools included in this map were subject to ABA accreditation at the time the LSAC Rural Initiatives Survey was administered.

Mapping Law School Rural Initiatives

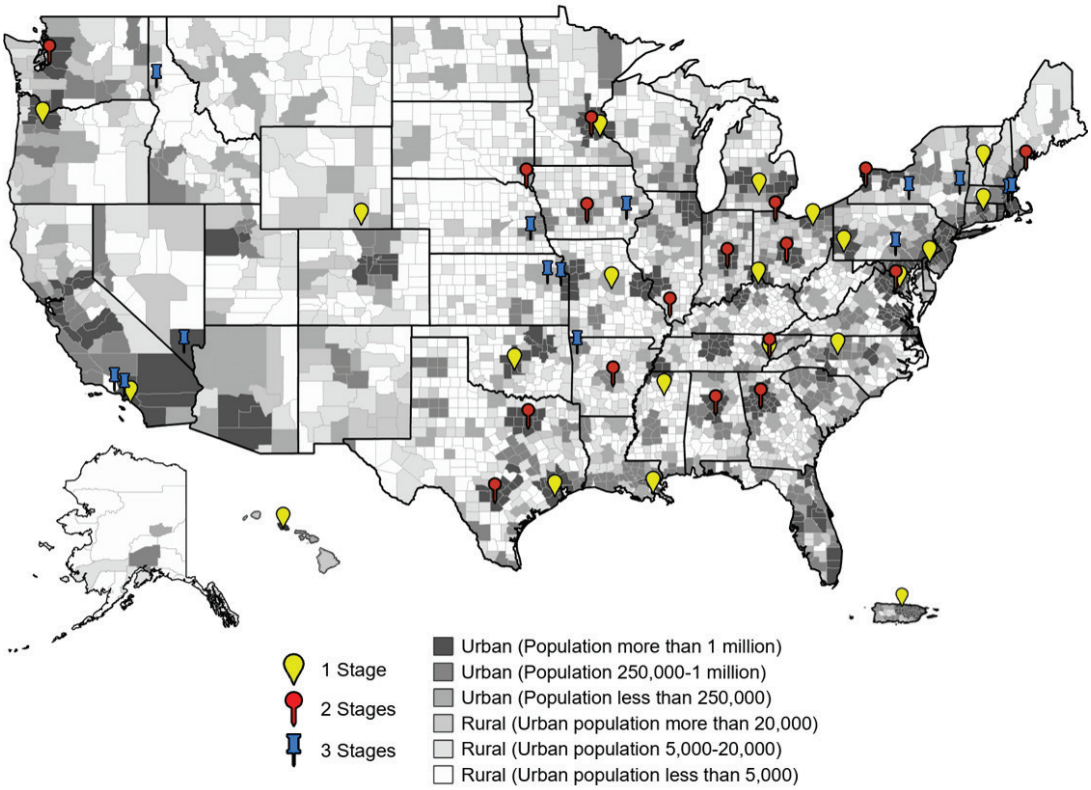
Seventy-five percent of participating U.S. law schools reported they had at least one active rural initiative focused on strengthening one of three stages of the rural legal pathway. The three stages of the rural legal pathway include: (1) recruiting students from rural communities, (2) preparing students for rural practice, and (3) supporting recent graduates who pursue legal careers in rural areas. The biggest proportion of schools have active rural initiatives focused on a single stage on the pathway (Figure 3).

- 40% had initiatives focused on one stage of the pathway.
- 33% had initiatives focused on two stages of the pathway.
- 27% had initiatives focused on all three stages of the pathway.

As the map illustrates, the law school rural initiatives landscape spans across the country, with many schools with initiatives focused on all three stages of the journey located geographically to serve expansive rural areas (Figure 3).

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Figure 3. Participating Law Schools by Number of Stages on the Pathway With at Least One Active Rural Initiative, and Distribution of Rural and Urban Counties in the U.S. and Puerto Rico



Source: 2026 LSAC Law School Rural Initiatives Survey Data and U.S. Census Bureau

Initiatives Along the Three Stages of the Rural Legal Pathway

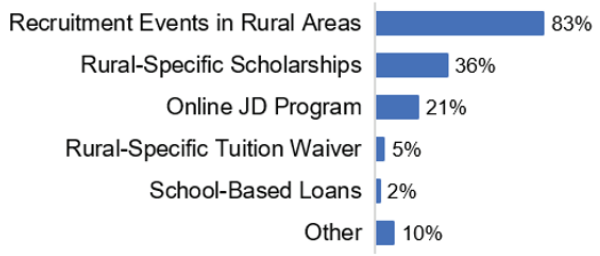
Recruiting Students From Rural Communities

Rural initiatives focused on recruiting students from rural communities were the most common among responding schools with 61% reporting at least one initiative. An additional 30% of schools were interested in learning more about developing and implementing rural recruitment initiatives, and one school was in the process of actively developing an initiative.

Specific types of recruitment initiatives include recruitment events in rural areas, scholarships specifically for students from rural areas, online JD programs, rural student-specific tuition waivers, school-based loans, and other efforts (Figure 4).

Most schools (83%) reported holding recruitment events in rural communities, making this by far the most common initiative (Figure 4). Financial strategies, which are likely to be increasingly important now that the new federal loan caps are active, are considerably less common. Over one-third (36%) of schools use scholarships, but only a small fraction use tuition waivers or school-based loans (5% and 2%, respectively; Figure 4). Other reported strategies included automatic acceptance from state schools if students meet certain criteria, a law school immersion program for undergraduate students, and a program that supports students from 0L through graduation.

Figure 4. Recruitment Initiatives (n=42)



Source: 2026 LSAC Law School Rural Initiatives Survey

Note: "Online JD Program" includes two online programs with one weekend per semester in person.

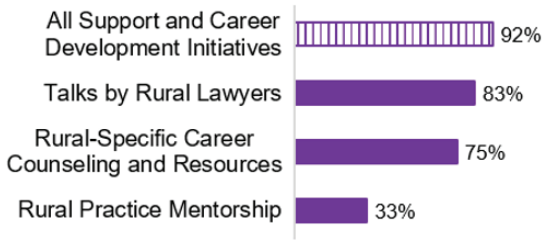
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Preparing Law Students for Rural Practice

Initiatives to prepare students for rural legal practice were reported by 57% of schools. These were categorized as support and career development, clinical, classroom and research initiatives.

Support and Career Development Initiatives: Initiatives aimed at support and career development were the most common with 92% of schools implementing at least one initiative (Figure 5). The most common service was hosting talks given by rural practice lawyers (83%), followed close behind by rural practice-focused career services counseling and resources (75%) (Figure 5). Stand-alone rural practice mentorship was reported by one-third of responding schools.

Figure 5. Top Three Support and Career Development Initiatives



Source: 2026 LSAC Law School Rural Initiatives Survey

Clinical Initiatives: Among schools reporting at least one clinical initiative, summer clinical experiences were the most frequently offered rural program (72%), with 89% of schools reporting at least one clinical initiative overall (Figure 6). These experiences represent an important investment in experiential learning and rural workforce development. Additional clinical formats, such as in-house general practice clinics and in-house rural practice clinics, were offered by roughly one-third of schools, suggesting opportunities to grow the range of clinical pathways available to students (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Top Three Clinical Initiatives (n=36)

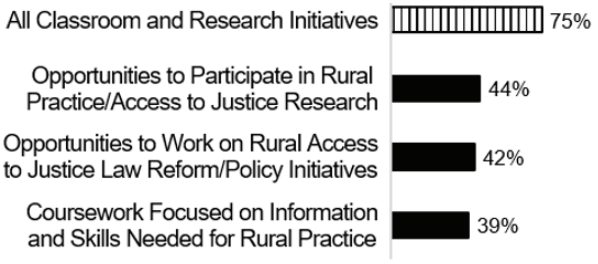


Source: 2026 LSAC Law School Rural Initiatives Survey

Developing and sustaining rural experiential learning opportunities and clinics depends on a variety of factors, including local rural needs and current student interest. Most schools reported moderate levels of student demand for rural practice clinics, with 23% indicating that students were moderately interested and 47% reporting that students were somewhat interested. Only 13% of schools reported very high demand, where student interest typically exceeds available placements. Notably, only one school reported significant challenges in attracting student participation. These findings suggest that while demand varies across institutions, many schools have an engaged student base that supports the continued development of rural experiential learning opportunities.

Classroom and Research Initiatives: Classroom and research initiatives were the least common of the preparation initiatives, but still widespread with 75% of schools working in this stage of the pathway reporting them (Figure 7). These initiatives include opportunities to participate in rural legal practice or access to justice research, opportunities to work on rural access to justice law reform or policy initiatives, and coursework focused on information and skills needed for rural practice.

Figure 7. Top Three Classroom and Research Initiatives (n=36)



Source: 2026 LSAC Law School Rural Initiatives Survey

The most commonly reported classroom and research initiative was opportunities to participate in research related to rural legal practice or access to justice in rural areas, offered by 44% of reporting schools. Only 39% of schools offer coursework focused on rural legal practice (Figure 7). The availability of these educational opportunities is influenced by a range of factors, including student interest, faculty expertise, institutional priorities, and local rural needs.

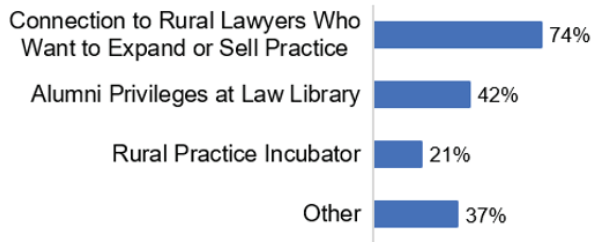
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Supporting Graduates Pursuing Rural Practice

With only 30% of schools reported having initiatives that support law school graduates who want to practice in rural areas, these are the least commonly reported of all stages along the pathway. Almost half (46%) of schools expressed interest in learning more about these types of initiatives, more than at any other pathway stage.

Initiatives that support graduates pursuing rural practice include connection to rural lawyers who want to expand or sell their practice, alumni privileges at the law library, rural practice incubators, and other initiatives (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Initiatives That Support Graduates (n=19)



Source: 2026 LSAC Law School Rural Initiatives Survey

The most common initiatives involve connecting recent graduates with lawyers in rural areas who want to expand or sell their practice (74%) and law library privileges for alumni (42%) that may include but are not limited to check-out privileges, access to research databases, and assistance from law librarians with research. Only a small proportion of schools ran a rural practice incubator (21%). These are programs primarily for solo or small law firms through which law school graduates are trained and mentored by established attorneys, with the idea that this hands-on training will allow new lawyers to develop their networks and community relationships while building client relationships and learning the business of running a small or solo law practice. (Kidder, M. L. (2022). The future of rural lawyering: How law schools should embrace a general practice legal clinic model to address the current and future legal needs of rural and smaller communities. *Drake L. Rev., 70*, 83.) Other initiatives schools have undertaken included hosting a rural practice reception for employers to meet law students paired with an optional seminar on rural practice recruiting for employers, loan forgiveness programs, organization-based fellowships for graduates, pairing attorneys with recent graduates for pro bono work, and alumni mentoring programs.

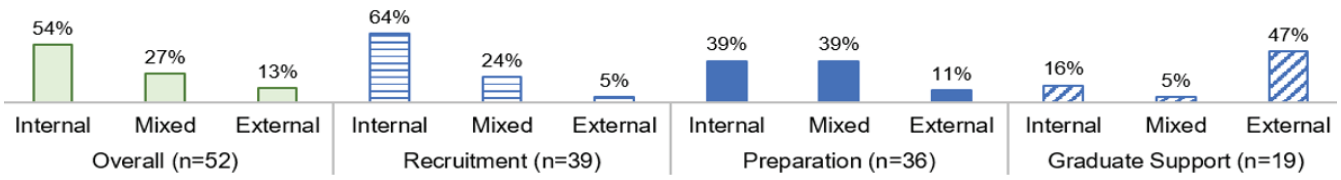
Similar to other stages along the pathway, only a small proportion of reporting schools systematically evaluate their initiatives to support graduates (21%), and even fewer track how many graduates go on to practice in rural areas (16%); although, close to two-fifths of responding schools would like to begin evaluating their programs (37%).

Funding Rural Initiatives

Most law school rural initiatives are supported with internal funding (54%), 13% using external funding sources, and 27% relying on a mix of internal and external funding (Figure 9).

Funding sources varied based on initiatives focuses on different stages of the rural practice journey. For example, 64% of recruitment initiatives use internal funding only, 24% use a mix of internal and external funding, and 5% use external funding only. Funding shifts for initiatives preparing law students for rural practice where 39% use internal funding only, 39% use a mix of internal and external funding, and 11% use external funding only. External funding becomes the dominant source of funding for initiatives focused on supporting graduates who are pursuing rural practice. While only 15% use internal funding and 5% use a mix of internal and external funding, almost half (47%) use external funding only (Figure 9). These insights highlight opportunities for funding, especially for initiatives that require intensive workforce development, as seen with initiatives supporting graduates pursuing practice in in rural communities.

Figure 9. Rural Initiative Funding Sources



Source: 2026 LSAC Law School Rural Initiatives Survey

Note: "Internal" means that only internal funding sources were used. These sources may include funding that is part of the admissions office, another law school department, the general law school operating budget, or an affiliated university budget. "External" means only external funding sources were used. These sources may include funding from state or local bar associations, government entities at any level, an outside organization, or another respondent-specified source such as donors. "Mixed" means a mix of both internal and external funding sources were used. Funding sources overall and for each of the stages of the pathway separately may not sum to 100% because some respondents were unsure of how their initiatives were funded.

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External Working Relationships

External partnerships are common among schools implementing rural initiatives, supporting the idea that the rural legal services may only happen with the collaboration of outside partners. Of the 75% of responding schools with at least one initiative somewhere along the pathway to rural legal practice, 63% reported at least one external collaboration to facilitate their rural initiatives, and 21% reported having no collaborators. Almost half of the schools with one or more active initiatives (48%) have more than one collaboration. The most common collaborators include:

- state bar associations
- state governments
- law firms located in rural areas and/or serving rural clients
- organizations focusing on rural access to justice
- organizations that work with but do not focus exclusively on rural populations

These collaborations underscore how many schools have built important relationships to expand access to rural legal services and can serve as models for other schools who have not yet established these important relationships.

School Challenges to Increasing Access

Law schools face several challenges in developing, implementing, and sustaining rural initiatives. Using schools' open-ended responses, there are four common sets of challenges across all stages of the pathway to rural practice:

- **Funding and staffing capacity:** Schools described limited financial and staff resources as barriers to launching, expanding, or sustaining rural initiatives. Some also noted reliance on temporary or external funding that can make longer-term programming difficult.
- **Student awareness and perceptions:** Schools reported challenges generating awareness of rural career opportunities and addressing erroneous perceptions that rural practice offers fewer professional opportunities than other legal career paths.
- **Student placements and infrastructure:** Rural placements, i.e., clinical placements, can be difficult to arrange and maintain because of travel distances, transportation costs, limited housing, and other logistical constraints in rural communities.
- **Data and identification:** Schools described difficulty identifying students from rural backgrounds or determining which graduates ultimately enter rural practice, complicating both targeted outreach and longer-term assessment.

The nature of these challenges varies along the pathway. For example, challenges related to:

- recruitment centered on identifying and reaching prospective rural students
- preparing students revolved around placement capacity and logistics
- supporting graduates pertained mainly to sustaining support and engagement after students leave law school

Taken together, the responses suggest that the existence of rural initiatives often depends not only on institutional interest, but also on the resources, infrastructure, community relationships, and information schools need to implement sustainable programming.

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Conclusion: Building and Innovating

The Law School Rural Initiatives Survey represents an important first step in understanding the landscape of rural focused efforts across legal education and the vital role law schools play in addressing rural access. The findings demonstrate both the strong commitment of law schools to strengthening the rural legal pathway and the various ways schools are responding to the need for legal services in rural areas. As key partners in expanding rural legal access, law schools' ability to sustain and grow this work depends in part on the resources available to them and the institutional environments in which they operate. This study makes it clear that cross organization, cross-sector collaboration is needed to strengthen and expand rural access to justice initiatives towards increased impact. Moving forward, the legal community, collectively, will need to continue to collaborate and increase access to funding, shared knowledge, strategic partnerships, infrastructure, community relationships, and other supports. Approaching the next phase of this work in a systematic, coordinated, and strategic way can help schools build on their existing efforts, expand services, and continue developing programs that meet the needs of both their students and the rural communities they serve.

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