



New college network builds support for students in rural and small-town America

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Sixteen of the nation's most prominent universities and colleges have teamed up in a new effort to help students from small-town and rural America enroll in, succeed at, and graduate from the undergraduate program of their choice.

The [STARS College Network](#) (Small Town And Rural Students) will build on efforts to create new pathways to college for students who might not otherwise recognize the full range of educational opportunities available to them. It is supported by a \$20 million gift from Trott Family Philanthropies, the foundation of Byron and Tina Trott.

This nationwide effort, the first of its kind, is designed to empower students to find the best institution for them, whether or not they ultimately choose to enroll at a STARS member, according to James Nondorf, STARS Co-Chair and Vice President of Enrollment and Student Advancement at the University of Chicago.

The network includes Brown University, California Institute of Technology, Case Western Reserve University, Colby College, Columbia University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northwestern University, The Ohio State University, University of Chicago, University of Iowa, University of Maryland, University of Southern California, University of Wisconsin, Vanderbilt University, Washington University in St. Louis and Yale University.

By teaming up and redoubling their own efforts, STARS members also hope to inspire other institutions, alumni, philanthropists and policymakers to increase their efforts to support students in rural areas and small towns, building an ecosystem of opportunity that spans the nation, according to Douglas Christiansen, STARS Co-Chair and Vice Provost for University Enrollment Affairs & Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Vanderbilt University.

Member institutions said STARS will support efforts including:

- Pipeline programs that bring students from rural communities and small towns to campus over summer break to help them prepare academically and for college life
- On-campus events for prospective students from rural areas and small towns, including flying students in from their hometowns
- Expanded visits by college admissions staff to high schools in small towns and rural communities
- Support for students in the college application process, including workshops and sessions designed to help students throughout their college search
- Scholarship funds for students and help applying for financial aid
- Fly-in and virtual programs for counselors, teachers and administrators from rural and small-town high schools, to help them better support their students on the path to college
- Creating ambassador and mentor roles for current students, faculty and staff to promote a campus community that welcomes and supports students from small-town and rural America
- Partnering with local and national businesses to provide internships and job opportunities for the next generation of rural and small-town Americans

All programming is free to students who register with STARS.

STARS is also teaming up with [Khan Academy](#) and the non-profit tutoring platform [Schoolhouse](#) to offer a free, online math curriculum and peer tutoring for students in small towns and rural communities, leading to certification of mastery in calculus — an important credential for admission to more selective colleges and universities that is not available from all high schools.

Founding supporter Byron D. Trott, merchant banker and Chairman and Co-CEO of BDT & MSD Partners, was inspired by the ways in which college transformed his own journey, which began in small-town Union, Missouri, and included undergraduate and MBA degrees at the University of Chicago. Trott-affiliated philanthropic efforts have provided substantial support to students from small towns and rural communities, including through launching rootEd Alliance, which has convened philanthropists, as well as funding from Missouri, Texas, Tennessee and Idaho, to train and place dedicated college and career counselors in rural high schools.

“There is a massive talent pool in our small towns and rural communities that has so much to offer — to our colleges, to society and to future generations,” Trott said. “These smaller communities simply don’t have the resources to help show these students what is possible and help them get there. Collaborative partnerships like STARS and rootEd not only help to turn the tide — they have a multiplier effect that can catalyze far greater change than any single institution or agency could make on its own.”

Students who live outside metro areas face a variety of obstacles to pursuing a college degree, according to college admissions professionals. College recruiters, facing their own resource limitations, often bypass smaller communities — the same communities where students are less likely to encounter programs that help with college applications, financial aid paperwork and standardized test preparation.

Students say that a big part of the challenge is simply understanding what is possible and feeling welcome at institutions that can seem unfamiliar and intimidating.

STARS Network members will also build upon existing programs that help provide a support network for students from small towns and rural areas once they have enrolled — the kind of support many colleges already provide for students from different backgrounds. STARS leaders say this work is central to their mission of creating a student body that brings together a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives. Undertaking it as a network will allow them to build on best practices.

In addition to illuminating opportunities for students, the launch of STARS complements and can help facilitate efforts to make college more affordable, such as the Davis New Mexico Scholarship. The Davis New Mexico Scholarship has already partnered with institutions including the University of Chicago to support more than 250 first-generation students from New Mexico. Andrew Davis, who founded the \$60 million effort, said he hopes to expand college access nationwide.

“College access initiatives, ongoing support programs and meaningful scholarships must work hand in hand to support underrepresented students all the way from high school to college graduation,” said Davis.

Ultimately, STARS members say this ecosystem of initiatives can help bridge the growing rural-urban divide in America by bringing students together to share the widest possible variety of experiences.

Increased enrollment of students from other parts of the country will also help institutions achieve diversity in more traditional metrics, such as first-generation and low-income students. An estimated one-third of students from rural and small-town America are people of color.

Research shows that college graduates from rural areas often return to their communities, so efforts to help rural students get the greatest benefit from higher education can create a virtuous cycle of support, success and giving back to the next generation.

Students can learn more and participate in STARS programs at <https://starscollegenetwork.org/>. For media inquiries, please contact Katelyn Yoshimoto at kyoshimoto@uchicago.edu.