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Rural Students and Higher Education: An Overview of Challenges and Opportunities

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The experiences of students from rural communities in higher education have long been under researched; however, the increasing number of rural students enrolling in higher education has turned the tide. Further, policymakers across multiple sectors have demonstrated a renewed interest in rural communities. Despite this shift, conceptualizations of rural communities and people living in rural spaces are often inaccurate and misrepresented. This overview seeks to create a more accurate picture of who rural students are and highlights some of the unique challenges and vast opportunities available to scholars interested in contributing to the dearth of literature in this area.

While students from rural communities have historically enrolled in higher education at lower rates than any other geographic locale (i.e., towns, suburbs, or urban areas) designated by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the percentage of rural students matriculating into colleges and universities is increasing (NCES, 2014). For colleges and universities, rising enrollment means rural communities could serve as new spaces to focus recruitment activities. In fact, a recent report conducted by The Bush School of Public Policy at Texas A&M University (2014) for Educate Texas looks to the recruitment of rural students as a way to increase enrollment numbers in higher education in Texas. As rural student enrollment increases within postsecondary education, it is important that colleges and universities are prepared to support them. Yet, there is a dearth of literature examining the experiences of rural students in higher education and the unique resources and needs they bring to college campuses.

Furthermore, results from the 2016 presidential election have generated renewed interest in understanding rural populations. While existing narratives of rural populations tend to focus on working class and impoverished White people, such perceptions paint an inaccurate picture of rural spaces. As scholars focus their attention on rural populations, it is important that they acknowledge the diversity that exists within rural America. In this background, I begin by exploring the issue of defining what rurality is, and then examine current data on rural students. Finally, I turn to historical and contemporary research on rural students in higher education and consider the vast opportunities for future inquiry.

Defining Rural

One of the first challenges that scholars face in researching rural students is actually defining what rural is. To draw attention to the various ways rurality is defined and conceptualized, the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* offered multiple viewpoints in its inaugural volume. Whitaker (1983) examined the multiple ways rural is defined within the fields of social work and education, concluding that there is no agreed upon definition. To highlight

this struggle, he began his own article with an overview of how the authors from the first issue of the volume chose to define rural:

Mathews and Winkle (1982) and Holder (1982) use the term in an undefined general sense. Drummond (1982), Chu and Culbertson (1982), Rider (1982), and Sawyer and Sawyer (1982) report research from settings that are, apparently, deemed obviously rural. Pladson and Lemon (1982) employed a rural typology based on the dual factors of school enrollment and distance from an urban center. Dermott, Roberts and McIntire (1982) made no reference to the concept but reported a study set in a Maine community that metropolitans might label rural. (p.71)

Within the second issue of the volume, authors Guenther and Weible (1983) were explicit about their choice to not offer a definition of rural, though they concede that, for those who do seek to offer a definition, “ the only common denominator of rural schools is size” (p. 59). Still, the authors who did offer a definition focused on combinations of school size, population density, and geographic isolation, including agency definitions based on similar concepts (Fagan & DeVore, 1983; Imig, 1983; Meyer, 1983; Nelson, 1983). More than 30 years has elapsed since that inaugural volume and scholars continue to wrestle with how to best define what it means for a place to be rural.

The lack of agreement on a singular definition for rural exists beyond research in education and social work — even the federal government cannot agree on a single definition of what should be considered rural (Cromartie & Buscholtz, 2008). Federal agencies use over two dozen different definitions of rural. Furthermore, these definitions are often urban-centric. This takes place when the agencies do not make an active effort to define rural, rather, they create an intentional definition for what is urban and any area that does not meet the intentional definition for urban is deemed rural. This also occurs when an agency’s primary classifications for rural are based on the distance from spaces that have been deemed urban. This is how the NCES categorizes rural spaces. The NCES, who uses an urban-centric definition of rural, (n.d.) begins with the definitions of urban areas and urban clusters as designated by the United States Census Bureau, which are:

densely settled cores of census blocks with adjacent densely settled surrounding areas. When the core contains a population of 50,000 or more it is designated as an *urbanized area*. Core areas with populations between 25,000 and 50,000 are classified as *urban clusters* (para. 23).

The NCES takes these definitions and further divides the category of rural into three sub-categories: rural-fringe, rural-distant, and rural-remote. The distance of the rural community from an urban area or urban cluster determines these categories. In addition to being urban-centric, the Census Bureau and NCES use definitions of rural that are also focused on population density as the defining characteristic of rural spaces. Similarly, state education agencies such as the Texas Education Agency (2016), defines rural districts based on district enrollment and enrollment growth rate; however, they do not take into account distance from other non-rural communities. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the serious implications for how researchers and policymakers use these shifting definitions of rural. First, these multiple definitions can impact the data collected on rural students, and who is included in the category of rural students, which affects researchers’ ability to accurately understand this population (Cromartie & Buscholtz, 2008). Second, a lack of conceptual clarity also makes it difficult to build theory through research and create implications for practice (Whitaker, 1983).

Many rural scholars argue for more multi-dimensional definitions, which could include cultural, economic, social, and/or political factors that allow rurality to be defined in its own right not simply the opposite of urban (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Donehower, Hogg & Schell, 2011a; Kulcsár & Curtis, 2012). While taking a multidimensional approach can further complicate and expand the ways in which rural could be defined, it is still important for scholars to continue to pursue frameworks for defining rural spaces to reflect the complexity of research in rural communities. Therefore, while there remain multiple methods and options for defining what rural is, it is vital that researchers are clear and deliberate about the definitional choices that they make and the impact those choices have on their analysis and implications (Cromartie & Buscholtz, 2008).

The contributing scholars to *Texas Education Review's* critical issue on rural education acknowledge these complexities. Rosser and Gurrola focus on Texas and outline the diversity of rural communities across the state. Specifically, they highlight a span of 45 different definitions of rural based on varying laws and agencies and posit that those seeking to serve rural students in Texas must take into account both definitional and cultural differences. Roberts primarily draws data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which defines nonmetro as a combination of “1) open countryside, 2) rural towns (places with fewer than 2,500 people), and 3) urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas)” (USDA, 2016), but also use a variety of other coding systems to help differentiate between rural spaces. Longhurst offers a qualitative analysis, having participants to self-identify as rural, which helps break away from the traditional urban-centric definitions. The issues of defining rural play a significant role in Gillon’s discussion of the challenges and opportunities researchers in rural communities face. Therefore, Gillon offers a more thorough overview of ways that rural has historically been defined and how rural scholars are moving forward than what is offered here in this overview. Each of the contributors of the critical issue on rural education approach this challenge in a different way, but all pursue their work in a way that centers rural spaces and students, rather than casting them simply in opposition to urban areas. As with all discourse, it is important to note that definitions shift across federal and state agencies, research, and with time, therefore it is necessary for articles concerning rural students to be clear about who is being discussed in any given report or study. With these challenges in mind, I will move on to the current data concerning rural students.

Current Data on Rural Students

In 2013, rural students made up 18.4% of the students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools nationwide (NCES, 2014). These students are predominately White, 72.4%, occupying the largest percentage of White students in any other geographic locale. While American Indian and Alaska Native students only make up 2.1% of students in rural schools, this percentage is larger than any other geographic locale. The student population in rural communities is also 12.2% Hispanic, 9.3% Black, 1.4% Asian, and 2.4% multiracial. A report from The Bush School of Public Policy at Texas A&M University paints a very different picture for the demographics in Texas. The report breaks Texas into three rural regions with East Texas being the smallest and the only one that is predominantly White at 64%, 8 percentage points behind the national average. The other two regions, West Texas and South Texas, are predominantly Hispanic¹ at 50% and 68%, respectively. With the largest population of rural

students in the country residing in Texas, it is important to acknowledge the diversity represented in these demographics. Furthermore, this data also highlights a national trend of an increasing Latinx population within rural communities (Lichter, 2012).

Rural schools also have the second highest high school graduation rate of any locale category at 80.6% (NCES, 2014). While less than one percentage point separates it from the Suburban and Town categories it is almost ten percentage points higher than the graduation rates from the City category. Despite these competitive high school graduation rates, enrollment in higher education for individuals age 18-24 in rural communities is the lowest of any locale recognized by NCES. At 29.1%, enrollment is 12 percentage points below the town locale, which is the next closest category. To be clear, this does not mean that only 29.1% of students who graduated from a rural school enroll in higher education. Since NCES does not track the students into higher education, but their enrollment based on their current geographic locale, it is not possible to know the exact percentage of students who enter higher education from rural communities. Still, the discrepancy is noteworthy. Collectively, these statistics offer a useful demographic overview of students in rural communities across the US and in Texas and provides a context for understanding current research on rural communities.

Current Research on Rural Students

While large gaps exist in research on students from rural communities in higher education, there has been research focused on education in rural communities and the educational aspirations of rural students. This body of work can be helpful in understanding rural students as they enter higher education. This research mostly focuses on why rural students have historically held lower enrollment rates in higher education than their counterparts in other geographic locales. The majority of research in this area reveals a strong link between the economies of rural communities and the educational commitment and aspirations of students within those communities.

Rural economies play an important role shaping students' life choices and labor decisions in higher education. Research indicates rural economies are narrowly focused and land-based, whether through the cultivation of the land through agriculture or the extraction of natural resources through mining or logging (Atkin, 2003; Donehower et al., 2011a; Howley & Howley, 2010). As a result of these small-scale economies, students often value education that directly links to skills that will be valued in the local workforce (Atkin, 2000, 2003; Hektner, 1995; Morris, 2012). This often means that manual labor and technical skills are valued over more formal education within rural communities, particularly for young men (Brown, Copeland, Costello, Erkanli, & Worthman, 2009; Morris, 2012). Therefore, higher education is not always seen as necessary or valuable for participating in the rural economy.

Another way in which economy impacts the choices of students from rural communities has to do with students' concerns that the local economy will not be able to support their career aspirations (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Demi, McLaughlin, and Snyder, 2009; Hektner, 1995; Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes & Umbach, 2016). While students may feel that it is important to remain in their hometown, they may not see opportunities to pursue the career of their choice within the community once they have completed a degree. Higher education, then, is often seen as a source of outmigration from rural communities, where students who move away to pursue a college degree often do not return to the community (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece,

2014). This can increase the tensions students feel between pursuing higher education and continuing to contribute to their hometown.

Though most of the research concerning rural students has focused on the educational and career aspirations of rural students, there are few studies examining the experiences of rural students once they have matriculated into higher education. Though students experienced tensions between their career aspirations and their loyalty to their town as early as the eighth grade (Demi, McLaughlin, & Snyder, 2009), these tensions are dominant in college. Research has shown that students from rural communities often discuss a feeling of being constantly pulled back to their community (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Dees, 2006; Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner, 2015). These tensions are not only the result of physical separation, but social separation as well. While many rural communities espouse conservative values (Atkin 2003; Dees, 2006), college can have a liberalizing effect on students (Dees, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Dees (2006) found that even students who remained in their community while enrolled in higher education experienced a tension between the impact of their time in the college classroom and the culture of their hometown. This literature lays a foundation for new practical initiatives to serve rural students and for future research on this population.

New Initiatives

If colleges and universities are going to intentionally reach out to rural communities to meet their enrollment needs, then institutions will also have an ethical obligation to meet the needs of rural students. Fortunately, as the population of rural students in higher education grows, so are initiatives to research these students. In 2016, the Center for Higher Education Enterprise at The Ohio State University began a collaboration with Ohio University to study rural students in Ohio and across the nation. In Texas, the Greater Texas Foundation and Educate Texas aimed their focus on rural students and students' entry into higher education. These research initiatives should help scholars fill the current gaps in research on rural students in higher education. This research can play a vital role in helping colleges and universities understand the unique resources and needs that students bring to their campuses and allow them to create support systems that will help rural students not only enroll in higher education, but also persist to graduation.

With the significant dearth of research on various aspects of rural communities, scholars interested in studying rural students in higher education have a wide array of topics available to them. For example, are there ways that increased participation in higher education reinvigorate rural economies rather than only contributing to brain drain? How do rural students who leave their community to enter higher education reintegrate into the community if they return following degree attainment? What strategies are most effective for encouraging enrollment in postsecondary institutions for rural students? Have certain institutional types been more effective at meeting the needs of rural students? The opportunities for research are vast; however, the challenges are also abundant. The pursuit of these inquiries should respect the diversity and unique resources of rural populations combating monolithic views of what rurality is and deficit perspectives that are embedded in societies understanding of rural spaces and at times even within rural students' understandings of themselves. Scholars should be clear when about how they are defining rural and be careful not to generalize findings too broadly. Such a misstep could result in reinforcing myths about rural spaces as monolithic or serve to essentialize

rural communities, practices, and economies (Lichter, 2012; Theobald & Wood, 2010). In this cultural and political moment with society turning its attention to rural America it is an exciting time for scholars invested in these spaces, yet it is all the more vital that this work is pursued with diligence and great respect for rural people and education.

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¹ The term Hispanic is used when it appears in the original source material to preserve accuracy. Otherwise, I use the term Latinx when referring to people of Latin American descent.