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Writing Rural:
Critical Perspectives on Rural Students and the College Going Experience

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Access to higher education in the United States has been restricted and limited to various populations since the creation of the first universities in the mid- to late-1600s (Thelin, 2011). Admission policies have historically prohibited people of color, women, and students from low socioeconomic status from participating in and earning a higher education (Rudolph, 1991; Thelin, 2004). Although these restrictive policies are no longer legal, higher education scholarship has shown that structural challenges still exist that prevent students from equitably accessing higher education because of race/racism, gender/sexism, and socioeconomic status/poverty (Bergerson, 2009) as well as citizenship status (Gildersleeve, 2010; Hernandez, 2013).

Less attention, though, has been given to the role of *place* as a challenge to accessing higher education and the ways in which place informs social systems and identities as they relate to post-secondary educational opportunity. In critically discussing the role of geography, Reynolds (2004) posited:

> While race, class, and gender have long been viewed as the most significant markers of identity, geographic identity is often ignored or taken for granted. However, identities take root from particular socio-geographical intersections, reflecting where a person comes from and, to some extent, directing where she is allowed to go. (p.11)

When scholarship has considered place, specifically in relation to educational inequities, it has typically been within an urban context (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). However, rural students are attending college at a rate lower than urban students as well as below the national average, despite the fact that rural students are graduating from high school at a higher rate than students in urban schools (Flora & Flora, 2013; McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010). The *Status of Education in Rural America*, a 2007 U.S. Department of Education publication, unveiled that college enrollment rates for both traditional age (18 to 24 years old) as well as nontraditional age students (age 25 or older) from rural areas were lower than students in urban or suburban areas. Given the fact that rural students are enrolling in higher education at rates lower than both urban students as well as the national average, it seems both timely and important to empirically study the relationship between rurality and college access.

Previous scholarship has suggested that a lack of group presence in higher education is typically related to issues of access (Bergerson, 2009). However, some scholars (McDonough et al., 2010) have begun to theorize that, for rural students, the challenges related to enrolling in college do not just lie in access but also in opportunity. In other words, the problem for rural students may not be just about specific barriers preventing them from accessing college, but whether they even consider post-secondary education as a possibility. Most research on rural students and college access has focused on students' post-secondary aspirations and attainment and the social and cultural capital of their families; in other words, what students aspire to be and what individual factors help or hinder them in obtaining that goal (Bickel, Banks, & Spatig,

1991; Burnell, 2003; Chenowith & Gallaher, 2004; McCracken & Barcinas, 1999; Rojewski, 1999).

Less attention has been given to the role of rural communities – defined in relation to place – in shaping students' understanding of post-secondary educational opportunity. Previous research on K-12 education has suggested that a comprehension of community context could be important to understanding educational success as well as the barriers that prevent some from experiencing educational success (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). Studying post-secondary educational opportunity from a community of place perspective allows for a multi-faceted examination that explores the role of location, social systems, and identity. Simultaneously, it does not discount familial roles and social and cultural capital in navigating post-secondary education. Rather, it includes and expands to explore other social systems as well as identity and location.

Thus, in this article, I engage readers with a discussion of the relationship between rural communities and post-secondary education opportunity. I begin broadly by synthesizing the literature around rural definitions and the process of defining rural, both to provide context for this article as well as to highlight the oppositional and deficit ways in which rural people and places have been and continue to be defined in the United States. I then move to the current literature related to rural students and post-secondary opportunity, which has primarily focused on the educational and vocational *aspirations* and *attainment* of rural students beyond high school. I argue this literature does not adequately account for the structures and systems that shape post-secondary aspirations and attainment and thus conclude by proposing the use of a sociological framework – community of place – to provide a more structural understanding of post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students.

Defining Rural

In order to study rural students and communities, a context for rural must be provided. However, this is often one of the greatest challenges for scholars studying rurality as the current literature not only lacks a common definition, but is also narrowly focused in the way it defines rural. In reviewing scholarship around rurality, the most commonly used definitions of rural tend to be quantitative in nature, framed in opposition to urban spaces, and/or characterized in a deficit manner.

Quantitative Definitions

Historically, definitions of rural have been crafted by governmental agencies as a way to count people and space, resulting in an almost purely quantitative idea of rural in the United States. This trend continues today, as current definitions focus on population density and/or land size instead of highlighting the characteristics that make a community/place rural (Khattri, Riley, Kane, 1997). The most commonly used definitions of rural are those crafted and adopted by organizations such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the White House's Office of Management and Budget, and the National Center for Educational Statistics. These arbitrary definitions suggest a place is rural if it has a certain number of people residing in the area and/or if it is a specific number of miles from an urbanized area. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau states that a place can be identified as rural only if it has less than 2,500 people residing in the area. A town or community that has more than 2,500 people but less than 50,000

people is considered an urban place, not to be confused with an urban area which has more than 50,000 people residing in such a space.

Flora and Flora (2013) discussed the problem with researchers utilizing government definitions for the purpose of guiding empirical research related to rurality:

Giving a place a particular characteristic, thus "naming" it, suggests how people and institutions act toward it. When governments establish labels for places, they are generally for administrative purposes, to determine which places are eligible for specific government programs. When scholars establish labels, it is generally for analytical purposes, but because governments collect data, scholars often fall back on government labels. (p. 4)

This is not to say that government definitions are useless, as they provide one way to think about rural. However, this one dimensional portrayal of rurality can be harmful to places and communities as the numerical parameters often dictate which rural areas receive specific services (Flora & Flora, 2013). By using definitions that are almost completely reliant on quantifiable characteristics, places that are very similar in their location, social systems, and identity may actually be defined differently simply because one rural area has 2,450 people while the other has 2,510 residents. As suggested by Khattri et al. (1997), in order to understand the complexity of rurality, definitions of rural should include qualitative characteristics that capture the essence of rural spaces, people, and communities. Unfortunately, as discussed in the next section, even when rural definitions have attempted to qualify rural, the framing of the definitions tend to center urban and as a result, focus on what does not constitute as rural rather than what is rural.

Non-urban Definitions

Definitions of rural tend to be framed in opposition to urban and suburban spaces (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007). For example, in defining urban and rural for the purpose of demographics, the U.S. Census in both 2000 (Donehower et al., 2007) and 2010 intricately qualify what constitutes an urban area, outlining the numerical requirements as well as describing the different types of urban areas. The definition for rural places begins by stating that rural places are "territory, population, and housing units that the Census Bureau does not classify as urban."

There are many problems with defining rural in opposition to or in exclusion of urban. One of the main problems is that it creates a rural-urban binary that ultimately privileges urban spaces. By situating the definition of rural as anything that is *not* urban, rural is moved to the margins while urban is centered and privileged as the normative space. Critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and critical feminist theory (femcrit) (Tong, 2009) both speak to the harm of binaries – blackness is defined in opposition to whiteness (CRT) and feminine is defined in terms of masculinity (femcrit) – positing that by defining a marginalized population primarily in reference to the dominant group, that (dominant) group continues to be privileged which serves to (re)produce and maintain power for the dominant group within that binary.

One way we see this binary actualized is through the narrative around dependency. The typical narrative is that rural areas are dependent upon urban areas for such things as manufactured goods and access to various forms of capital. In reality, many rural areas are sites of resource production which are extracted and marketed for urban products (Thomas, Lowe,

Fulkerson, & Smith, 2011). In other words, urban areas are just as dependent upon rural areas as rural areas are on urban areas. However, because of our urban-centric society, the dependency narrative continues to be framed as an urban-rural relationship rather than a rural-urban relationship. While the latter framing may not completely disrupt the binary, it does challenge the centering of urban and the marginalization of rural.

It is important to remember though that the United States has not always been an urban-centric society. During the 1800s, the majority of people in the United States lived on farms or in small cities (Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith, 2011). However, an emphasis on industrialization shifted work and people to metropolitan areas, and by the time the Great Depression arrived, a large percentage of the U.S. population had moved to more urban areas (Thomas et al., 2011). With this shift came an emphasis on urban problems. Thomas et al. (2011) posit that "rural areas and the people who inhabit them are frequently marginalized within a predominantly urban society" (p. 2). These critical rural scholars further argue "that this basic fact is rooted in the very structure of our urban society and that this structure is experienced both in the physical space that we construct and in the culture that we learn and reproduce" (p. 2).

A second problem with defining rural in opposition to urban is that it produces a monolithic idea of rural. By not defining the complexities associated with rural, an assumed universal definition of rural is instead presented. For example, in the United States, rural is often defined or perceived as agrarian. However, Flora and Flora (2013) explain that "family farms and small farming communities dominate popular images of rural areas in part because politicians, lobbyists, and the media cultivate those icons, supporting the myths that agricultural policy is rural policy" (p. 3). Additionally, a monolithic notion of rural erases the complex histories of rural people, places, and communities. Donehower et al. (2007) argue that the traditions of many racial and ethnic groups are rooted in rural communities. Although, rural America is often thought of as largely white, racial diversity does exist in rural areas. Specific exploitative US policies and practices, ranging from slavery to the *bracero* program to NAFTA, have contributed to the (often involuntary) migration of people of color to rural areas. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the existence of racial diversity as well as the historical complexities of rural America in order to move away from a homogenous idea of rural (Brown & Schafft, 2011).

Deficit Definitions

In thinking broadly of discourse, including academic texts as well as magazines, newspapers and visual representations on television and in motion pictures, the dominant literacies related to rural perpetuate an idea of deficiency. Illiterate, unintelligent, and lack of culture are just a few of the ideas often associated with rural communities and people. Kim Donehower (2007), a rhetoric scholar who focuses on rural literacies, explained that the dominant rural literacies perpetuated by both academics as well as popular media hold that "rural people lack literate skills and value education less than their urban and suburban counterparts do" (p. 28).[1] This narrative is often told and retold in education scholarship as researchers share findings about lower educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment of rural youth.

The problem with such research is that not only does deficiency become the master narrative, but people, places and communities are labeled as deficient. Little attention is given to structures and systems that have created environments in which rural people, places, and communities attempt to exist in an urban-centric society. In a recent book chapter on rural college access, McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky (2010) explained the problems associated

with utilizing a deficit framework in relation to rural people and places. They draw on the work of several Latino scholars who have challenged deficit ideology in relation to cultural groups, pointing out that "deficit orientations ignore larger systemic conditions that perpetuate inequality" (McDonough et al., 2010, p. 193). They expanded this argument by explaining that much of the problem lies in capital. Underrepresentation of college students from rural areas is often attributed to the depressed economies present in these communities. Although McDonough et al. (2010) did not argue that some of these communities are indeed depressed, they did posit that it is inequitable to expect these communities to possess a certain kind of capital simply because that is the capital valued by higher education.

Multiple Layers

As discussed, three of the most common and dominant ways to define rural are 1) quantitatively; 2) in opposition to urban, and 3) from a deficit standpoint. Conversely, other scholars have suggested that if one is going to study rurality, a more complex and multi-faceted definition must be employed. For example, in their book, *Rural Literacies,* Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Shell (2007) defined rural in three ways: quantitatively, geographically, and culturally. They support the use of the U.S. Census's definition of rural but suggest that it not be used in isolation. Rather, they propose that definitions of rural also include geographic attributes such as U.S. region, landscape, and space. They also maintain the importance of defining rural within a cultural context. They suggest that rural, as a cultural term, involves the interaction of people in groups and communities. Flora and Flora (2013) speak similarly of this interaction but instead refer to it as *locality.*

Rural scholars, David Brown and Kai Schafft (2011), also posit that rurality is a multidimensional concept and must be considered within a combination of social, demographic, economic, and/or cultural aspects. In making this claim, they take a broader approach to their definition. Instead of subscribing to specific numeric parameters, they produce a more qualitative definition positing that rural places are natural environments, typically small and not very dense in population and geographically situated away from urban. They also give credence to the economic and institutional characteristics of rural places, explaining that economic activities in rural areas are typically focused around a specific industry. Institutionally, rural areas also may be limited in their access to religious denominations, clubs, associations, and service organizations. Socio-culturally, rural communities have been characterized by their close personal relationships and their conservative voting patterns. However, Brown and Schafft posit that "many of the popular socio-cultural attributes that comprise popular images of rurality have now diminished if they ever existed" (p. 7). For example, rural areas have typically been characterized as White homogenous communities. However, recent (im)migration of people of Color to the United States has diversified many rural communities calling for a contextualization of community that considers race and ethnicity as well as gender, religion, and sexual orientation.

Rural Students and Post-Secondary Educational Opportunity

Rural people and places have not been a dominant topic of inquiry in education studies in the United States. Topper Sherwood (2000) explained that "time and again, rural areas have been declared the orphaned 'stepchild' of the national education research program, which has

largely failed to adequately identify and address conditions specific to them" (p. 159). Of the educational research that does focus on rurality, the majority has been situated within the K-12 system and not within higher education. In fact, between 2003 to 2016, *The Journal of College Student Development*, a top tier journal in higher education and student affairs, published only two articles that focused solely on rural students in higher education (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016). Consequently, much of the literature presented in this article came from outside of higher education, including K-12 education, geography, and sociology. Although it can be argued that these disciplines add depth by providing a more interdisciplinary understanding of educational opportunity and college going, it is also a call to higher education, as a field of study, to contribute to this inquiry. Higher education as a field needs to participate and critically lead the study of rural students and college going.

My own journey to studying rural students has been one of shame, resistance, and reconciliation. I grew up in a town of roughly 10,000 people in a small house on the very edge of "town" – geographically isolated from metropolitan areas, interstates, and masses of people. I fled to the "city" as quickly as I could just days after my 18th birthday– in this case, Memphis. Four years later, I moved to another city – Nashville – and then a couple of years later, moved to "The City," also known as New York. When asked the question, "Where are you from?" I never hesitated to tell people that I was born and raised in a small town called Martin, located in the northwest corner of Tennessee. However, I always led with that response and then focused more on my experiences in the various urban environments in which I lived. In truth, I was ashamed of my rural background. Not only did I come from a rural area, but I came from the rural *South*. I knew the discourse surrounding the rural South, and regardless of whether that discourse represented me or my experiences, I felt I had to center my urban experiences in order to legitimize my identity as a person and as an academic.

In the last semester of formal coursework for my doctoral degree, I read an article by Elizabeth St. Pierre (1999), *The Work of Response in Ethnography,* in which St. Pierre described her experience of returning to her small home town after 20 years to study the environment that she resisted for so long. After almost 20 consecutive months of classes, St. Pierre's article was the first and only piece of scholarship I had been assigned to read that centered the experiences of both researcher and participants from a rural setting. The thought of studying rural students had entered my mind prior to reading her article. Yet, I had resisted that idea, convincing myself that research that centered the experiences of rural college students would not be (well) respected in the field of higher education. After much reflection, continued reading, and support from higher education scholars who study marginalized populations, I was reminded that rural people and places will remain in the margins of the literature unless scholars intentionally and authentically take up the challenge to center these important communities in our scholarship.

The current literature related to rural students and post-secondary opportunity has traditionally focused on the educational and vocational *aspirations* and *attainment* of rural students beyond high school. In the following sections, I critique the individualistic nature of this scholarship and suggest a sociological framework – community of place – that allows for a more structural understanding of post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students.

Aspirations, Attainment, and College Going

Much of the research on rural students and post-secondary life has focused on either students' aspirations – what they hope to achieve – beyond high school or what students are able

to attain or are predicted to attain after graduating from high school. For example, Chenoweth and Gallaher (2004) used Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to quantitatively study direct and indirect influences on the academic aspirations of rural Appalachian youth. Burnell (2003) also studied rural students' post-high school aspirations, employing a qualitative approach to understand how students who were college-able made the decision to go directly to work instead of pursuing some form of higher education.

Although these studies provide important findings, they are limited in understanding how opportunities for post-secondary education operate and present themselves within rural communities. Research that explores aspirations provides insight into what rural students want to achieve and/or think they are able to achieve once they finish high school. What these studies do not tend to focus on is how these aspirations are formed. In other words, there is a lack of attention to the structures that shape and inform students' aspirations for life after high school. For example, Burnell's (2003) article suggested that students who choose to go to work rather than pursue a higher education should not be viewed as deficient, or less than, because of their choice. Although a critical finding, her study does not address how the various parts of a rural community such as geographic location or schools or even a rural identity may inform how rural students construct and ultimately pursue post-secondary aspirations.

Additionally, within this scholarship, researchers continue to rely on binaries to discuss both opportunity as well as rurality. Similar to the ways in which rural has been defined in opposition to urban, some educational research has studied rural student aspirations in opposition to urban student aspirations (McCracken & Barcinas, 1999; Rojewski, 1999). In other words, instead of focusing specifically on rurality, scholars explored differences between rural and urban people and places. Both McCracken and Barcinas' (1999) study of the differences between urban and rural students, schools, and aspirations in Ohio, and Rojewski's (1999) quantitative study exploring work-bound and college bound rural and non-rural students using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, 1988-1994 included urban people and places. The challenge with comparing two groups is that one group becomes the default "normal" group. Given our urban-centric society, these studies often position urban as normal or real and rural as abnormal or unreal. Critical rural scholars, Taylor, Lowe, Fulkerson, and Smith (2011), refer to this as urbanormativity.

Another way the current scholarship constructs and reinforces a destructive binary is through the structuring of post-secondary education rural student outcomes. Studies that focus on the aspirations and attainment of rural students are crafted in such a way that uncritically suggest there are only two options for rural students after high school – continue to go to school or go to work, typically placing more emphasis on the latter (Burnell, 2003). For example, Rojewski's (1999) found that rural youth were more likely to be work-bound and that work-bound youth also reported greater involvement in vocational education. What studies such as this do not critically discuss are the ways in which rural youth are often tracked into vocational or collegiate education at the beginning of their secondary education, if not before. So, although there is truth in finding a relationship between work-bound rural youth and vocational secondary education, these studies only minimally acknowledge educational systems that 1) force rural students, many who may be the first in their families to attend college, to make decisions about their future aspirations at an early time in their life and/or 2) place students into a specific track of studies based on attributes such as perceived ability, familial college going culture, and socioeconomic status.

Rural Communities and Educational Opportunity

Considering the current state of college going for rural students, it is time to consider a shift in the way we study rural students, communities, and post-secondary education. Instead of focusing mostly on individual aspirations and attainment of individual students, we need to also study the ways in which specific elements of rurality shape post-secondary opportunity for rural students. Howley (1997) argued that improvement in rural education requires a logic quite different from the prevailing logic of school improvement because that logic is rooted in national and cosmopolitan issues that are often different from those faced by rural communities. That argument might also be applied to the way in which we think about college going for rural students. The current research and conversations around college access appear to be rooted in national and urban issues (Ahn, 2010; Jun, 2001; Richardson, Jr. & Bender, 1987; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). As evidenced in literature (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Rojewski, 1999), issues experienced in rural communities differ from those in other geographical areas suggesting that how we consider college access for rural people and communities may need to be different than the current way of thinking. Essentially, "what is needed is thoughtful research that attends to the particularities (and not generalities) of the places of which schools are or ought to be" (Howley, 1997, p. 132). Rural communities should not be relegated to college access models and frameworks that do not acknowledge the complexity of rurality or the various forms of capital that are specific to rural communities.

One way to understand post-secondary education opportunity for rural students is through the notion of community. Community, as a topic of inquiry, can be defined in different ways – most commonly as either a community of place or community of interest (Flora & Flora, 2013). Location serves as a distinguishing factor between these two notions of community in that communities of place revolve around a shared sense of place whereas communities of interest typically do not. For example, some people may belong to a scholarly community related to their area of research. However, members of a scholarly community may not share a common place or location. Rather, they may be dispersed throughout the world but identify as part of the community because of their shared interest in a specific area of inquiry. On the other hand, communities of place are interested in the physical location in addition to social systems and identity. The following subsections explore the relationship between these three components of community and post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students.

Location. Geographical locations of colleges and universities in proximity to rural communities can greatly affect post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students. With more colleges and universities located in (sub)urban areas, the physical ways in which college manifests itself via large buildings, campus signs, athletic facilities, and students walking to and from class are often absent from rural peoples' everyday lived experiences. In other words, rural students do not grow up seeing and experiencing college in their own towns. College is something that happens elsewhere, possibly in a place they have never visited.

This introduces a real challenge faced by rural students, one that requires them to consider leaving their community to pursue further education (Wright, 2012). The idea of students "going away" to attend college is a dominant idea that has permeated higher education discourse. Historically, traditional-aged college men in the United States left their family homes to board and attend college in a different location (Rudolph, 1991). As both the geographical and educational patterns in the United States have morphed, placing more people and higher education institutions in (sub)urban areas, the idea of attending college has also changed from

"going away" to college to "going" to college with the number of students who actually "go away" to college representing a small portion of the total number of students enrolled in post-secondary education. However, the geographical challenges placed on rural students suggest this population's only choice may be to go away if they want to pursue a bachelor's degree.

For example, in the state of Iowa, a state with a large rural population, there are only three four-year public institutions - one which is located in central Iowa and the other two located in eastern Iowa. If a student from Sioux City, which is located in the northwest corner of the state, wants to attend a *public* four-year institution in Iowa then that student has no choice but to physically "go away" in order to pursue a bachelor's degree. The state of Iowa also has an intricate community college system that consists of 15 post-secondary institutions. Many of the institutions have satellite campuses in addition to their primary campus, making geographical access to a community college much easier than a four-year institution. However, infrastructures play an important role in determining post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students. Even if a campus is only 20 miles from a student's home, that student still has to secure transportation to the institution, which in a state without any light rail system would mean by car, which becomes an additional expense inclusive of purchase/payment, gas, maintenance, registration, and insurance.

Entangled in this relationship between location and post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students is a connection to place. People from rural areas often feel a connection to the people and the physical environment of their community (Wright, 2012). For some, leaving home to pursue a higher education may not mean leaving home for a few years but rather permanently. Christine Wright qualitatively explored how a commitment to place can shape rural students' decisions around post-secondary education. She found that although some students do associate advanced education with rural outmigration, or leaving their communities, others viewed higher education as a way to improve the quality of life for both their families and their communities. In other words, although some rural college students concluded they would need to seek or wanted to seek employment outside of their community after completing their degree, others intended to return and use their degree for the betterment of their communities. Additionally, in their study titled "Rural Young Voices Project," D'Amico, Matthes, Sankar, Merchant, and Zurita (1996) found that rural students feel ambivalent about their experiences in rural communities. While students express a desire to move elsewhere, they also take joy and value from living in a rural place. Collectively, these findings are important for multiple reasons. First, they challenge the dominant narrative that implies all rural students wish to leave their communities and ultimately do leave their communities. Second, these findings highlight a real tension for rural students in considering post-secondary educational opportunity – the control that geographic location has on if and where they might pursue an advanced degree as well as future relationships with and in their communities.

Social Systems. In addition to location, social systems are also an important component of rural communities (Flora & Flora, 2013) and can assist with an understanding of post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students. Although social systems can be compromised of family, friends, schools, jobs and co-workers, civic/social organizations, and/or religious institutions, for the purpose of this article, I have focused specifically on K-12 education as a system that greatly influences educational opportunity for rural students via various forms of capital.

Individual college opportunity is predicated on K-12 institutional opportunity which in part is defined by the quality of the curriculum, preparation of teachers, and availability and

quality of high school counseling (Gandara & Bial, 2001; McDonough, 2004). Yet, one of the biggest challenges faced by rural schools is a perceived lack of resources, more specifically teachers, counselors, and curriculum. However, this perception of deficient resources is due in part to an imposed model of urban schooling in rural areas (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). In other words, expectations of how schools operate, including staffing and curriculum, are often driven by urban education theories and policies.

For example, in 2003, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) developed a comprehensive set of school counseling guidelines. These guidelines were based on research that suggested that "fully integrated, implemented, and functioning school counseling programs may help to enhance student performance and preparation for the future" (Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006, p. 248). Yet, research has also shown that rural schools often do not have the resources, specifically human capital, necessary to create a fully integrated school counseling program as defined by the ASCA. This is primarily due to the fact that rural school counselors are often asked to take on other roles within the schools, including clerical and disciplinary responsibilities (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Sink & Yillik-Downer, 2001). Contradictory to rural school realities, recent studies and policy reports focused on educational reform, have suggested an increase in the number of counselors as well as the amount of time devoted to college counseling to be a top priority for improving college access (Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, 2002; Gandara & Bial, 2001; McDonough, 2004). For rural schools that are already doing a lot with very little, policy suggestions such as this are systemically incongruent.

Teacher preparation has also shown to be integral in shaping post-secondary educational opportunity. Yet, the American Association of School Administrators has stated that a central problem for rural school districts is recruiting and retaining *quality* teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Many rural school districts are plagued with teacher shortages resulting in school districts recruiting teachers who are often unfamiliar with rurality, both geographically and socioculturally. Once they arrive, these teachers are often asked to wear many hats - be certified to teach more than one subject or grade level, teach to a wide range of abilities in the classroom, supervise extracurricular activities, and be able to adjust to the community. In other words, they are asked to be many things to many different people. These requests often prove to be challenging for teachers who are recruited to rural areas and can lead to attrition rather than retention.

Teacher shortages in rural areas have also led to recruitment of those who are simply unprepared to teach. Poor rural districts are popular placements for programs like Teach for America that task college-educated individuals who typically lack education degrees with facilitating the teaching and learning of rural students. Armed with a few months of training and no solid theoretical or methodological understanding of education, these individuals often lack the quality preparation necessary to adequately shape post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, Heilig, 2005). Additionally, the void they serve in rural communities is only temporary, as these individuals typically leave the communities after they have fulfilled their two-year commitment.

In addition to school counseling and teacher preparation, curriculum has also been identified as an important part of K-12 educational opportunity which as previously stated is strongly connected to post-secondary educational opportunity. The availability of courses and the actual courses a student takes during their secondary education are both strong predictors of college enrollment (Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993; Pelavin & Kane, 1990). Yet academic resources,

specifically college-preparation courses, are often less accessible to students in rural areas (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995; Hall & Barker, 1995). Advanced placement and college prep courses are not offered in abundance and sometimes not at all while a larger emphasis may be placed on vocational courses (Greenberg, 1995).

Rural identity. The construction of rural identity is intimately tied to the ways in which the dominant culture has defined rural people and places. As discussed in an earlier section, rural people and places are commonly defined in reference to urban people and places with urban deemed as normal and rural as abnormal and deficient. As a result, rural people are the recipients of messages that suggest "if they want the best of anything they must go the city to find it" (Theobald & Woods, 2010, p. 17-18) which they internalize as part of their identity. In other words, their communities are void of anything educated, cultured, or sophisticated. Theobald and Wood explain that this internalized oppression is similar to the kind of identity issues faced by People of Color, women, religion groups, and other marginalized populations. Conversely, some rural people also hold privileged identities at the same time they experience oppression via their rural identity. However, Theobald and Wood (2010) argue that despite the privilege held due to dominant class, race, or gender, "rural dwellers are nevertheless recipients of the messages from the dominant culture regarding what it means to be rural" (p. 18) – primarily that they are uneducated, unsophisticated, and outsiders to the college going community.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that rural people and places are marginalized not only in the educational literature, but in the ways they are defined, both in research and practice. The common ways of defining rurality quantitatively, through deficit lens, and in opposition to urbanity have obscured the complexity of rural locations, schools, and identities. It is imperative that the educational community understand how these aspects of rural communities shape post-secondary educational opportunity for rural students. I ask my fellow scholars, educators, and practitioners to critically consider the ways in which urban normativity has shaped your scholarship and practice, specifically as it relates to post-secondary educational opportunity. As we move forward with our scholarship and practice, let us consider how we can change the ways we work with and study rural students in higher education by qualitatively and complexly exploring and centering rurality and its relationship to other social systems and identities while resisting urban centric practices and frameworks.

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[1] Donehower uses the phrase "rural literacies" to refer to various forms of discourse.