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Connecting Rural Students to Higher Education

Joel Ontiveros

Rural students in the United States have a difficult time envisioning themselves at a college or university. K-12 education and culture in rural communities play a pivotal role in developing rural students' perceptions of higher education. Additionally, guidance from college counselors, parents, and admission officers' impacts rural students' confidence in college attainment. These students are less likely to pursue college due to distance from higher education institutions and feeling a lack of connection. If rural students are eventually recruited, admitted, and enrolled into higher education, they must navigate obstacles in academic and student life differently from their peers. In this paper, I will explore the stakeholders who influence rural students and their perception of the college experience as well as what admission offices can do to encourage and motivate these students to pursue higher education.

Keywords: rural students, counseling, parental involvement, admission, access

Access and retention efforts in higher education continue to shape the ways in which higher education institutions recruit, enroll, and support students throughout their collegiate experience. With different voices asserting which identities or marginalized groups should be at the forefront of enrollment efforts, a massive cultural group remains silent, if not unaware, about society's focus on motivating K-12 students to pursue higher education. Rural communities throughout the U.S. have a lack of exposure to, and thus lower levels of college attainment (Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018). The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as what is not urban, or a part of cities or suburban areas (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). As the population of urban and suburban areas increased, rural community populations declined. While the definitions of success in present-day America shift and transform, pursuing higher education allows rural students to enter a more rigorous academic and developmental environment that would otherwise be unattainable.

There are many topics to explore related to rural student pathways into institutions of higher education. Public universities typically recruit in college-going communities that are characterized by affluence and being primarily white (Jaschik,

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2019). With admission officers unlikely to recruit in rural communities, students in these areas lack resources related to college admissions and are less likely to be exposed to higher education institutions based on physical distance (Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018). Before rural students begin to navigate academic and student life at the university, they must be admitted and enrolled by university admission offices. However, rural students must first find ways to feel connected to higher education and perceive that college enrollment and degree attainment is possible.

In this paper, I explore the experiences of rural students and their perceptions about going to college. Characteristics of rural education and culture, enrollment and retention trends, as well as counselor and parent support all impact rural students' confidence in higher education pursuits. Admission offices must understand rural students' perceptions of higher education as well as do more to support and encourage college attainment amongst this student population. Recommendations for admission offices will be discussed after learning about the experiences of rural students and the many factors that impact their likelihood of attending college.

My Positionality

I was born and raised in a rural community, and there are three primary aspects of my life that inform my perspective as a rural student and scholar. The experience of growing up in my hometown, my matriculation through a rural high school, and my professional experience as an admissions counselor all influence and shape the ways in which I engage rural student culture.

My Hometown

Before entering college, I spent the majority of my life in the High Desert within San Bernardino county in California. I was born in Apple Valley and raised in a small, rural community called Wrightwood. A predominantly white and homogenous town, Wrightwood has a population of roughly 4500 people and is set in a valley within the San Gabriel mountains.

Wrightwood is a ski-resort town and consequently most of its economy relies on the tourism that occurs throughout the year whether for the snow in winter or the rustic, country vibe in the summer. The town is characterized by its most used stores and services. The post office is where everyone goes to pick up their mail since USPS does not deliver to individual homes. The hardware store is the main hub for do-it-yourself home projects and tools necessary for fixings around the house. Village Video is the movie rental store before streaming services rendered the shop useless. Jensen's is the only grocery store in town, and they can only be found in small, mountain communities. The most dramatic change to occur in Wrightwood during the past ten years was when a stop sign was placed on High-

way 2 in front of the post office. What originally was a thru-highway changed to a four-way stop that ailed the generations of residents who had to “get used to stopping when driving through town.” Wrightwood Elementary educates students from kindergarten to fifth grade before they must make the fifteen-minute journey down to Phelan, CA where the middle and high schools reside.

My High School

Serrano High School (SHS) was a fairly large, public school that enrolled students from four surrounding communities. The student enrollment of SHS is about 2300 and is comprised of mainly white and Hispanic student populations with small representations of Black and Asian students. There are 13 Advanced Placement courses, numerous clubs, and a counseling staff of four. There are additional guidance technicians, but the counselors are more knowledgeable about college admissions. There is a Career Center at SHS, but it focuses solely on work opportunities, internships, and jobs upon high school graduation. One unique characteristic of my senior class was although our class began with nearly 900 students in 2005, only 500 students graduated in 2009 primarily due to inter-district transfers and drop-outs.

Pursuing college was not popular among SHS graduates, but high achieving students were encouraged to apply to four-year universities. Those who were not admitted to four-year institutions or did not plan to pursue higher education were required to enroll in the local community college to be able to graduate from SHS. Although every student graduated from SHS with a college option available, many students required to enroll in the community college would eventually drop out. Counseling assistance to high-achieving students was available for those interested in applying to four-year universities, but actual knowledge about specific colleges and their admission processes were limited. Counselors always encouraged the top of the class to apply to the University of California (UC) system and were fairly helpful in completing the system-specific UC application. I distinctly remember inquiring about UC San Diego, which was the only UC campus that had six residential colleges with differing academic requirements. When I asked my counselor, who had a great reputation at the high school, about the differences between the UC San Diego colleges she could not provide additional information and told me to do some research online. Curious to me then, and unsettling now, was the lack of information my counselor had about UC San Diego. UC San Diego is the second most applied to UC campus in the system and often heralded as being one of the nation’s top public institutions.

I applied to nine colleges and universities in California as was recommended by SHS counseling and admitted to all but one. To this day I reflect on what I did not know about college admissions as well as whether I should have applied to

colleges and universities out of state.

My Primary Connection

My parents helped me develop my most important value which is making higher education accessible and attainable for students. Both K-12 public educators, my parents were my primary motivation to attend college. Without their support and encouragement, my higher education goals may have mimicked that of other peers or students in my hometown. My primary motivation to pursue college was developed and fostered by my supportive and caring parents.

My experience as a student who navigated living and attending a rural, public high school has since motivated my professional work as well as graduate studies in student affairs. I was employed by two separate University of California campuses as an admission officer for five years. Throughout my time in admissions, I witnessed the disparities in college preparation and connectedness to higher education institutions that high school students experience. While I conducted outreach and evaluated applicants from around the world, I strove to expand recruitment efforts in rural communities during my final year of admission work. In the following sections I will explore the educational, cultural, and relational influences on rural students' connection to and perception of higher education pursuits.

The Rural Student Experience

Access to resources and quality K-12 education in rural areas provide a foundation for how rural students think about pursuing higher education. The Status of Education in Rural America by the National Center for Education Statistics found that Advanced Placement course offerings, access to technology, and student enrollment was much lower within rural communities compared to other community types (Provasnik et al., 2007). Related to on campus resources, rural schools also had a lower average number of counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and special education aides as well. Their study also found that while the high school drop-out rate was only higher than students from suburban areas, rural students typically had lower college enrollment rates than students from suburbs or cities. These differences by community type are important when conveying the unique circumstances of the rural student experience. The K-12 years for rural students are defined by a lower quality of education as well as limited resources like counselor support. Rural education traits can influence how rural students perceive they are less prepared to pursue higher education and thus lack a desire to attend college.

A lack of resources and student support within rural schools describe rural student education, but rural culture and family characteristics also play a role in shaping the perceptions of higher education for rural students. The family environment

of rural students is much different compared to students from urban or suburban communities (Byun et al., 2012). Research demonstrated that rural students were less likely to have a parent with a college degree or come from a family with an income of \$50,000 or more (Byun et al., 2012; Roscigno & Crowle, 2001). Additionally, rural students were more likely to be a part of a traditional family rather than have a single-parent or be a member of a nontraditional household (Byun et al., 2012). Roscigno & Crowle, (2001) determined that disparities within a rural students' home setting can impact their academic success in high school as well as interest in higher education. Family environment and homelife of rural students is critical to understanding their perceptions of and likelihood to enroll in higher education institutions. Rural students may be raised in traditional family households, but they are more likely to be first-generation and low-income. Rural students are less likely to understand the importance of higher education if their parents have not received a college education as well. Additionally, if rural students are typically low-income then they may believe college attainment is not possible due to the financial burden of paying for college. These common characteristics of rural culture contribute to negative perceptions of higher education for students from rural families and communities.

Patterns in College Enrollment and Retention for Rural Students

The educational and cultural experience of rural communities also informs the lower rates of college enrollment and retention for rural students. Byun et al. (2015) studied enrollment patterns between different groups of students based on rural or urban environments. Rural students were less likely to attend more competitive institutions as well as delay their entrance into higher education. Byun et al. also noted that rural students were less likely “to be continuously enrolled in a college” (2015, p. 275). Rural students who identified as having a low socio-economic status and had less rigorous curriculum in their high school were also less likely to attend college. These patterns demonstrate how the characteristics of rural communities are negatively impacting students' perception and thus enrollment into higher education.

Similar to enrollment trends, retention patterns of rural students in higher education provide additional insight into their perception of the college experience. Primary characteristics like economic hardship, being a first-generation student, and poor academic preparation were identified as obstacles rural students experienced while in college (Byun et al., 2012). Rural students that came from families who earned an income of \$50,000 or more were more likely to earn a college degree than students whose families made \$25,000 or less. Rural students were also more likely to complete their college degree if enrolled in college directly after high school compared to a delayed entrance into higher education. Similarly, rural students who enrolled full-time into higher education were more likely to persist

than those who enrolled part-time. Lastly, while rural students were less likely to be exposed to rigorous curriculum during their high school years, their academic performance in college was as good if not better than peers from urban or suburban communities (Byun et al., 2012).

However, full-time enrollment in college directly after high school indicates the most advantageous route towards rural student degree completion. Additionally, although rural students may attain lower quality K-12 education compared to other community types, rural students are just as academically successful once they enter the university. Rural students can be supported and encouraged to attend college full-time upon high school completion despite the rural cultural traits that may negatively impact these students.

Counselor Impact on Perceptions of College

During my time as an admissions officer at the University of California, I often communicated with high school counselors as a resource while they assisted their students applying to college. High school guidance and college counselors' role in advising students on the college application process are critical in developing student interest in higher education. Rural communities were typically comprised of public high schools when I conducted outreach efforts as an admission officer. Understanding the unique challenges public school counselors face when promoting higher education can further inform rural students' perception of higher education. Additionally, admission offices can better serve rural students by understanding the context of the counseling support they receive while in high school.

Differences in public school counseling staff and practices can inform how students are motivated to pursue higher education. Tieken (2016) interviewed high school counselors from various public, rural schools to evaluate the content they discuss with their students about higher education. Counselors emphasized to students that college is necessary for securing a career path (Tieken, 2016). Counselors were students' primary motivation when considering higher education opportunities and this ultimately caused students to believe a college education was necessary for career attainment. Tieken (2016) found that counselors consistently reinforced to rural students that degree attainment would lead to secure employment upon graduating from college. Although counselors are primary motivators for rural students to pursue higher education, research also demonstrates that on average one public school counselor advises and supports 455 students (Clinedinst, 2019). Additionally, even if counselors at public schools are interacting with many students, information about higher education is presented to these students less than 20% of the time. Public high schools, especially in rural areas, do their best to encourage students to pursue college. However, smaller counseling staffs and less time dedicated to higher education information can cause rural students to

believe college is unattainable.

Although rural students are told to pursue college as a means of finding a secure career, they are simultaneously informed to consider the financial burden of higher education. Perna et al. (2007) found that counselors encouraged their students to be aware of the financial implications of attending college. The work of these counselors was difficult because they provided financial literacy information while navigating state policies and the unique needs of their student population. Other external factors also affected how counselors inform their students about financial aid resources for college (Perna et al., 2007). District requirements and initiatives, state policies related to funding, and relationships with local colleges or universities all impacted counselors' ability to inform their students of how to navigate the higher education financial landscape. Counselor responsibilities are nuanced and extensive when identifying the unique needs of college-bound students, and this can negatively impact rural students in particular. Rural students' confidence in pursuing higher education may not be possible when considering the multiple obstacles counselors face as they navigate how to provide financial education about college to these students.

Parental Impact on Perceptions of College

Counselors are the stakeholders within the school setting, and in the home parents influence rural students' perceptions of higher education. Nelson (2016) interviewed 30 students from rural communities and confirmed that most students desired their parents' assistance and support when considering higher education. Of the students interviewed, roughly half of their parents were helpful and collaborative about higher education pursuits whereas the remaining half were not involved whether through a lack of knowledge or interest about college. Support from parents was defined as necessary social capital in helping rural students feel motivated to pursue college (Nelson, 2016; Schultz, 2004).

While parents can provide positive support and encouragement, rural parents can also deter and discourage their students from pursuing college. Provasnik et al. (2007) found that compared to parents from city and suburban areas, parents from rural communities believed their student's highest educational attainment would be less than a four-year degree. Parents from rural communities were less likely to hold a college degree and thus less likely to believe that college is necessary for career attainment. Tieken (2016) noted that rural culture permeated relationships between parents and their children and parents often discouraged their students from pursuing higher education. Parent support is an essential component for rural students to build confidence in going to college. However, since rural parents are more likely to only expect high school completion, rural students may believe college attainment is not possible. The impactful dynamics rural parents have on

their students' perception of higher education can allow admission offices to further understand how to better meet the needs of rural students.

Recommendations

Education, culture, college attainment patterns, and support systems all contribute to how rural students feel connected to and perceive higher education. Admission offices should be knowledgeable of the challenges rural students face to better support and advise them as they pursue higher education. I offer three suggestions for admission offices to consider for future recruitment and enrollment of students from rural communities. These suggestions include institutional scholarships for rural students, collaborative recruitment with other universities, and utilizing current rural students attending college to conduct outreach efforts.

Institutional Scholarships for Rural Students

Financial investment will always be a concern for students applying to college from rural communities due to lower income and being more distant from universities. Admission offices can implement specific scholarships for students from rural communities during the admission process. Any alleviation of cost will encourage rural students to think more positively about pursuing higher education. Ohio University created an institutional scholarship program that would provide 29 scholarships to 29 different counties within the state (McDavis, 2010). Although the scholarships were limited, providing merit aid to students throughout different areas of the state would ensure diverse student enrollments from various locale types including rural communities. Innovative scholarship programs can be a great tool to encourage positive perception of higher education pursuits for rural students.

Collaborative State Recruitment Strategies

A primary burden to admission offices is high costs for recruitment efforts both in and out of state. Admission officers must choose where to recruit based on pockets of highly mobile and affluent communities to ensure increases in applications and admits from those areas. Consequently, these affluent areas receive more visits from admission officers and typically have college fairs that host numerous universities. Public university systems can think creatively to be more intentional about collaborative in-state recruitment strategies.

In the University of California system, I often found myself and the other eight campuses attending college programs at similar high schools each recruitment season. While each UC campus offers a unique college experience, outreach efforts in the fall primarily consisted of conversations and information surrounding the admission process. Since the UC uses a shared application process between

the campuses, the system could decide specific in-state recruitment regions to be distributed across the admission offices of the UC. This would ensure that our campuses are conducting outreach to new high schools that may have never had a UC campus visit as well as expand our recruitment territories in-state. A collaborative approach to outreach would enable the UC system to extend into rural communities and encourage more applicants from these areas. Increased visibility and information about admission processes to rural students would positively impact the perceptions of higher education in these communities.

Rural Student Outreach Efforts

Lastly, current rural students enrolled in college can be utilized as advocates and ambassadors of higher education. Colleges can seek out and employ rural students already enrolled on their campus since admission officers may be unlikely to visit high schools in rural areas. After finding these students, institutions can train and employ their rural students to conduct presentations about their institution or admission processes when students return to their rural hometown during academic breaks. Allowing students from rural communities to hear from college students with shared experiences can inspire rural students to pursue higher education. During my time in admissions at UCLA, we piloted an ambassador program similar to this idea. While we had limited students employed by the admissions office, we still saw increases in application numbers and interest to our campus thanks to student ambassadors visiting schools in areas that our office had not previously visited.

Conclusion

Numerous obstacles define why rural student populations negatively perceive higher education pursuits. Educational and cultural differences in rural communities, college enrollment and retention trends, and lack of support from counselors and parents all contribute to why rural students perceive higher education as unattainable. Admission officers must be informed about the differences in the rural student experience to understand their disconnection to higher education. I recommend scholarships for rural students, collaborative college recruitment efforts, and rural college students connecting with prospective students to increase rural student confidence in pursuing higher education.

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