

INVESTING IN RURAL POPULATION

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LATION

By Ashley Dobson

Moe Alzer checked all the boxes of the perfect college applicant—grades that put him at the top of his class, involvement in extracurricular activities, and a drive to be the first in his family to earn an advanced degree.

Getting into a good college should have been a breeze. At least, it would have been, if he lived anywhere else.

Instead, Alzer was born and raised in Nashville, North Carolina, a small, rural town with a population of around 5,500 people. He attended a high school in the next town over, where less than one-fifth of each graduating class attends college.

Allen Pratt, the executive director of the National Rural Education Association, said rural students are “not on the map” for decision-makers, making them an overlooked and underserved population.

Alzer falls into what Darris Means, an assistant professor at the University of Georgia who studies rural students of color, considers an “invisible” population.

“What is happening with rural students and families is there has become this narrative out there, because of the 2016 election, that painted rural people as mostly white, mostly conservative,” Means said. “That narrative is making a population of students and families invisible.”

Despite their lack of visibility, more than 7 million students in the United States are enrolled in rural school districts—about 15 percent of all public school students. Almost half of those rural students hover near or below the poverty line, and not all of them are white. More than 25 percent are children of color, according to a report by the Rural School and Community Trust.

Means believes it is crucial to higher education to understand what supports or hinders these rural students’ pathways to college and to uncover what determines their college choices.

Alzer always had “big aspirations” and he knew accomplishing his dreams would include college. “I was good at school, and I really wanted to get out of that small town and figure out some better opportunities for myself,” he said.

Unfortunately, he was basically on his own when it came to the college application process. Alzer had a “pretty bad” experience finding support at his high school.

“They didn’t really know much about the application process it seemed like. They didn’t seem very motivated. They didn’t try to push students to get into better colleges. They didn’t push students to take harder courses,” he said. “They tried to have us sit back and take the easier route to graduate.”

Alzer tried to navigate the process on his own.

“The application process was very confusing. They really just told me the website to go to and that was it. My parents were immigrants from overseas. Some of the tax forms were difficult to figure out.”

He learned the most information from a local college fair, but it didn’t take place until late September of his senior year, putting him behind in the process.

Despite the challenges, Alzer beat the odds. In the spring of 2014, he was accepted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Out of his class of 250 seniors, he was just one of about 50 students—just 20 percent—to go on to college.

Nationwide, 59 percent of rural high school grads go on to college the following fall semester, compared to 62 percent of urban graduates and 67 percent of suburban grads, a recent National Student Clearinghouse study found.

Pratt believes this trend “starts in elementary and middle school.”

“It goes back to before the admission process to how we market college and trade schools and two-year schools to these students, how we introduce

them at an early age to this process. If we leave it to chance or if we leave it to hoping they hear what’s going on, some of them are not going to know what is out there and they are not going to pursue it,” Pratt said.

Lynn Knoch, the school counselor at Lawson High School (MO), finds these statistics “frustrating,” but recognizes that it is a reality she must work within.

Knoch is the sole counselor at her school, serving about 400 students. She has no support staff and she estimates that she can dedicate between 30 to 40 percent of her time to college counseling.

Lawson is located about an hour from Kansas City, Missouri, but Knoch said this is just far enough away that many of the resources available to city schools aren’t available to her students. She sometimes has a hard time getting college recruiters to visit her small campus.

As she fights with a lack of resources, she said she must “get creative and find creative ways to do things.” She hosts her own college fair. It features only nearby schools, but it helps kickstart the college search process.

He believes colleges and universities need to increase their outreach to rural communities if they hope to ever move the needle for this underserved population.

“A freshman isn’t going to drive to another town in the evening with their parents to go to the big Missouri ACAC or NACAC fair. But they might walk down to our commons during our school day,” Knoch said. “That exposure sometimes helps drive those students. Sometimes it just takes a little seed when they are a freshman or a sophomore to stay in their head until they are a senior.”

Means has run into similar issues during the course of his research.

“As I’ve talked to students, it’s very clear they have tremendous support from teachers, from counselors, from family members to go to college. The challenge of this is having that road map to understand how to get there,” he said. “When we think about rural schools, a lot of them are smaller, not all of them, but a lot of them, but even if they are smaller, having one school counselor in a high school can make it really challenging for everyone to get the information they need to prepare for college. I would say one of the challenges is trying to provide more resources to schools and communities that can help students on their pathway to college.”

He believes colleges and universities need to increase their outreach to rural communities if they hope to ever move the needle for this underserved population.



“There is an opportunity for colleges and universities to do more outreach to rural communities, particularly the more selective institutions and flagship institutions. I went back to my high school and I asked some of the students, ‘When I went to high school, we used to have people from colleges and universities come and visit us and talk to us about going to college. Do you all have people come to your school?’ The response I got from students was overwhelmingly the only people who come and visit their school are the military and the local technical college,” Means said. “To me, I think there’s an opportunity for colleges and universities to think about how do we do more outreach to rural communities and give them our radar screen and not sort of forget about them in the college admission process.”

But if the first hurdle is getting rural students in the door, then the second challenge is keeping them there.

Rural students are more likely than suburban and urban students to drop out between their freshman and sophomore years of college, National Student Clearinghouse reported.

Knoch believes there are a variety of factors that contribute to a low retention rate among rural students, but one of the biggest is a lack of support—both financial and emotional—from parents who likely didn’t attend college.

“I think because some parents haven’t been to school, they may not see the value in spending the money on that. You could get a job here, why spend all that money on tuition?” Knoch said.

The transition can be “a little overwhelming” at first, Alzer admitted. But mentoring programs and other resources aimed at rural students can encourage student retention. Though Nashville is only an hour away from

campus, it can feel like another world. UNC has a student population of more than 29,000—about five times the size of Alzer’s hometown. But the services offered by the school helped Alzer find his way on campus.

“I feel like I get more attention even in this bigger class size than I did in my small [high school] class. I felt like the teachers were so unprepared at my school. There were just so many more resources once I got to UNC,” he said. “There are student mentors. There are office hours where I can go and talk to my professors regularly. I feel more connected to my college and my professors than I ever was in high school.”

And beyond visiting his family, he rarely looks back to the small town he left behind.

Now a senior, Alzer will graduate this spring. He plans to pursue a master’s degree and then continue to medical school—overcoming the odds in every sense of the word.

Fewer than one in five rural adults over the age of 25 have a college degree, according to the US Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service. Nationally, about half of the adult population has a degree, the Lumina Foundation reported, highlighting the need for action.

“I think colleges and universities really have an opportunity to really investigate: What are the support services, and how are we working with rural students who are coming to our college or university when we don’t have a high population of rural students to start with?” Means said. [L](#)

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