

FROM COUNTRY TO CONCRETE: MOTIVATORS FOR RURAL STUDENTS CHOOSING AN URBAN UNIVERSITY

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While rural students enter higher education at lower rates than their urban and suburban counterparts, an even smaller number of rural students make the active choice to leave their community and pursue a postsecondary degree in an urban setting. As part of a larger phenomenological study, this article explored the motivating factors for rural students who chose to attend an urban university and how the rural students understood the role of their rural community in their decision to attend an urban institution.

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Rural Students are a growing population on college and university campuses in the United States (Koricich et al., 2018; Legutko, 2008; NCES, 2014). With high graduation rates from high school, but matriculation rates into higher education that lag behind their urban and suburban counterparts, some stakeholders in higher education are looking to rural students as an answer to enrollment challenges (Texas A&M, 2014). Previous research has considered reasons that rural students struggle with the choice to pursue higher education and why they may choose to remain in or near their community if they do pursue a degree (ex. Demi, et al., 2009; Hillman, 2016; Longhurst, 2017). The current study sought to better understand what factors might motivate those students who do ultimately choose to leave their rural community to pursue their degree in an urban area. Urban institutions interested in enrolling rural students should understand the context rural students are being recruited from and the factors that might motivate rural students to move to an urban area to pursue a degree. Furthermore, understanding the motivations behind rural students' enrollment decisions may help faculty and staff better meet the needs and expectations of these students once they arrive on an urban campus. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, we examined the research question: *What are common factors that motivate rural students to pursue a postsecondary degree in an urban area?*

College Choice for Rural Students

College choice is described as the process that students experience in the transition from high school to college (Pitre et al., 2006). Chapman's (1981) model of student college choice specifies the need to take into account both background and current characteristics of the student, the student's family, and the characteristics of the college. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice also identifies both internal and external variables that are

necessary to understand students' college choice. The internal and external variables intertwine throughout three stages: predisposition, search, and choice (Pitre et al., 2006). Pitre and colleagues (2006) utilize both of the aforementioned models in their proposed integrated model of college choice that includes behavioral aspects, specifically within the predisposition stage.

Hillman and Boland (2018) highlight the role of geography in the college choice process, characterizing it as "highly localized" with a majority of students attending public two-year or four-year institutions choosing a school within 25 miles of home, and the largest percentage (41%) of private four-year institutions coming from within 25 of the institution. The geographic component of college choice can be particularly important for those students with close ties to their community, such as rural students (Longhurst, 2017; Tyler et al., 2011). However, these students may find themselves in what Hillman and Boland (2018) call education "deserts" or "refuges," in which students have no or extremely limited local options for higher education. This provides context Koricich and colleagues' (2018) work, which reveals that students from rural communities are not only less likely to enroll in higher education, but the disparities are even greater for those enrolling at four-year institutions, particularly those that are highly selective. With the strong place-attachment being a common characteristic for rural students (Longhurst, 2017), understanding the role of geography in college choice could be a vital component to college choice for this population (Hillman, 2016; Hillman & Boland, 2018). Sansone and colleagues (2020) highlight that this might be particularly important for rural students of color.

In an attempt to add to research characterizing rural students' college attainment process, Morton and colleagues (2018) found three categories in rural student's perceptions pertaining to college access; perception of rurality, perception of college access, and perceived factors influencing college

attainment. Utilizing focus group interviews based in a social capital framework, Morton et al. (2018) identified internal and external factors that contribute to understanding rural students' challenges with college attainment. Similar to the forthcoming research on economic opportunities, students identified the lack of opportunity in their rural community as one of many driving external factors for their college aspirations.

Economic Opportunities

Opportunities for economic mobility were found as one set of external factors in rural student college choice (Morton et al., 2018). Carr and Kafalas (2009) acknowledge that career opportunities in rural communities can provide for a family; however, these opportunities can be subject to "stagnating wages, disappearing benefits, and downsizing" (pp. 20-21). Students begin wrestling with the tension that exists between their desire to remain in their rural community and concerns that the community will be unable to support their career aspirations as early as the seventh grade (Demi, et al., 2009). This can also be seen in Means' 2018 case study, which focused on the career and college aspirations of rural Black and Latinx middle school students. His work highlights how the economy within the rural community the case was based relied on the manufacturing industry; however, those jobs were now gone. The students in the study were looking toward careers in fields such as medicine, science, the arts, and the law. While they had not fully developed their plans for college at this age, the participants understood higher education to be the next step toward careers in those areas.

Agger and colleagues (2018) found that adolescents' increased perceptions of job opportunities in their rural community were associated with decreased educational aspirations. Furthermore, those rural youth who revealed higher educational aspirations were more likely to migrate out of the rural envi-

ronment than those with lower educational aspirations. Means and colleagues (2016) studied a group of rural African American high school students in the Southeast and found that they experienced

two primary points of tension related to college and career aspirations and their rural community: tension related to limited career opportunities in the students' community given their career aspirations and tension related to college choice and leaving home to attend college (p. 555).

In the end, while students may often feel that career opportunities in their hometown are limited, pursuing a postsecondary degree can contribute to a phenomenon known as rural brain drain, which reveals ways in which rural communities not only invest in and prepare their highest achieving students for higher education but also encourage them to move away and pursue it. This concept was also evident in a study by Sherman and Sage (2011), in which the researchers explored how education is either valued or rejected by the rural community. The findings revealed that education can be a source of tension and confusion in which local schools can be the source of either inclusion or exclusion from the community's limited resources and social support (Sherman & Sage, 2011). Sherman and Sage (2011) also found that the community's best and brightest students were provided more support and often encouraged to pursue higher education outside of the community.

Means and colleagues (2016) conducted an instrumental qualitative case study to understand how rural African American high school students experience the college-going process. One of the findings highlighted the tension related to limited career opportunities in the students' community and tension related to college choice and leaving home to attend college. Means et al. (2016) also identified a social theme in their data in which their participants felt encouraged to

leave the community to pursue a postsecondary degree by family members and staff from their high school and college access programs.

Theodori and Theodori (2015) highlight that rural students whose educational aspirations include vocational and trade school, as well as community college, tend to remain in their hometown community. Using multivariate logistic regression, their study revealed that a higher attachment to the community and a sense of belonging are independently and significantly associated with intentions to migrate. Longhurst (2017) found that place-attachment, conceptualized as an affinity for a place and affection for the particular qualities of that place, played a significant role in college choice. Rural students in Southern Oregon were influenced by place-attachment to attend the local community college and Longhurst (2017) found that students were both attached to the physical space of where they grew up as well as the familial ties that existed there.

Values

The models of college choice previously offered, discuss both external and internal factors. While economic opportunities may be a primary external factor, real or perceived alignment or conflict between a student's values and those of their rural community and potential college could serve as one of the internal factors in the college choice process. Rural areas are often described as small and familial; areas in which most, if not all, members of the community know each other (Morton et al., 2018). This familiarity prominent in rural areas can contribute to the development of communalism, a term coined by Boykin (1983) and defined as an awareness of the fundamental interdependence of people (as cited in Tyler et al., 2011). Communalism can play a role in the attachment students have to their home community and to their family (Tyler et al., 2011). While communalism may lend itself to increasing place-attach-

ment for students, it is also relevant in understanding the previously mentioned community encouragement that high achieving students experience in rural communities.

It is easy for some to assume that rural America is conservative and largely Republican, which can be supported by various voting data and analyses (Badger, 2012; Graham, 2017; Kron, 2012). Research has consistently shown that outer suburbs and rural areas are strongholds for largely White communities that share traditional values. On the flip side, urban areas, typically of dense social diversity, have historically supported more liberal views (Uberti, 2017). The differences between rural and urban spaces, whether perceived or real, are often reinforced and accentuated through media, which can often portray rural spaces as "backward" or lacking progress (Donehower et al., 2011; Theobald & Wood 2010). Given the polarizing understandings of rural versus urban environments, it could be possible for young rural students to find themselves caught in between their communities' values and those of more liberal cities.

While the perceived distance between rural and urban values could cause many to anticipate tensions for rural students who enroll at an institution in an urban area, Dees (2006) found that students can feel a tension between their college campus and their hometown even when that campus is located within their rural community. Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note the liberalizing effect of higher education. Coupling this liberalizing effect with the perceived liberal nature of urban spaces could further amplify concerns for rural students who believe it is important to stay connected to their hometown. Still, some rural youth may be interested in exploring the urban environment they see through the media and the more liberal values they perceive to exist in those spaces. With limited research examining rural student experiences in higher education, particularly their matriculation to colleges and universities in urban settings, pulling together literature

that highlights college choice, economic opportunity, and potential value differences between rural and urban areas reveal factors that could potentially connect to existing college choice models.

Methodology

The research question explored in this article is pulled from a larger phenomenological study that examined how rural students made meaning of the phenomenon of transitioning between their hometown and university campus. The portion of the study highlighted here focused on how students understood the role their rural community played in their choices concerning higher education, particularly their choice to attend a university in an urban area.

Sampling

Eleven participants were selected for the study using a combination of criterion and maximum variation sampling. Criteria for this study included: 1) self-identifying as rural, 2) their community falling within the NCES (n.d.) categories of town or rural, 3) having spent at least their high school years in the rural community, 4) being enrolled at the university fulltime, and 5) being in at least their second consecutive year being enrolled at university fulltime.

Recruiting a diverse cross-section of rural people in terms of their personal demographics and the demographics of the communities they came from allowed us to identify what was common about the experiences of rural students who choose to attend an urban university despite a variety of demographic differences. Therefore, recruitment for the study happened by email through multiple university listservs, focusing on organizations, departments, and programs that would help us reach students who were not only racially and ethnically diverse, but also came from a variety of schools and majors on the campus. The recruitment email included a link to an initial survey that helped ensure students met the criteria for the study and gathered personal

and community demographic data to work toward maximum variation within the sample. Ultimately, the intentional recruitment strategy yielded variation in the sample that was comparable to what would be expected from the broader student population, so the only students who completed the survey that were not included in the study were those that did not meet the initial criteria (See Tables 1 and 2 for participant and community attributes).

Data Collection

In addition to the initial survey, students also participated in two semi-structured interviews and journaled throughout the research process. Participants were able to select the interview location to ensure it was a place they would feel comfortable. The two semi-structured interviews were based on a modified version of Seidman's (2013) phenomenological interviewing model. The first interview focused on the students' life history particularly, what it was like growing up in their rural community and how they made various decisions about higher education including their initial decision to go to college, where to attend, and what to major in. The second interview was typically scheduled for three days to one week after the first to allow an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their interview, but still be close enough in time to connect back to the first interview. This interview focused on the students' experiences on their college campus, their transitions between their hometown and new campus, and how they made meaning of those experiences.

Participants were also given the opportunity to journal from the first interview until they returned their transcripts for review. They were asked to make note whenever they noticed their rural upbringing impacting their experiences on campus or when their time on campus was affecting their relationship to their hometown or the people there. There was no minimum or maximum length for journal entries or number of entries participants should complete, this just

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Classification	School
Michelle	21	White	Woman	Senior	Liberal Arts
Laura	21	Hispanic	Woman	Senior	Natural Sciences
Layne	19	Asian	Woman	Sophomore	Liberal Arts
Travis	21	White	Man	Junior	Liberal Arts
Kathleen	20	White	Woman	Sophomore	Liberal Arts
Rachel	21	African American	Woman	Senior	Liberal Arts
Sarah	19	White	Woman	Sophomore	Social Work
Samuel	20	White	Man	Junior	Business/ Liberal Arts
Isabel	21	Latina	Woman	Senior	Social Work/ Liberal Arts
Emilia	21	Hispanic/Mexican	Woman	Senior	Education
Aaron	19	Asian	Man	Sophomore	Business

Table 2: Community Characteristics

Pseudonym	Locale	Population¹	Demographics of Town	Political Leaning of County
Michelle	Rural Distant	600	Heterogeneous	Republican
Laura	Rural Distant	Unincorporated Community	Heterogeneous ²	Republican
Layne	Town Remote	5,700	Predominantly Latinx	Democrat
Travis	Rural Remote	700	57% White, 34% African American	Republican
Kathleen	Town Remote	10,700	Predominantly White	Republican
Rachel	Town Remote	35,800	Heterogeneous	Republican
Sarah	Rural Distant	1,200	Heterogeneous	Republican
Samuel	Town Remote	36,100	Predominantly Latinx	Democrat
Isabel	Town Fringe ³	6,100	Predominantly Latinx	Democrat
Emilia	Town Remote	35,800	Heterogeneous	Republican
Aaron	Town Distant	5,700	Heterogeneous	Republican

offered an additional opportunity to capture their thoughts between and after the interviews.

Transcripts of the interviews were returned to the students to review for accuracy and allow them to offer further explanations or clarifications for anything within the interviews about which they wanted to share more. Students returned their final journal entries with their approval of the transcripts from their interviews and any additional information they felt was important to increase the trustworthiness of the data. The majority of the data used in this article was pulled from the first interview, which again focused on the students' experiences growing up in their rural community and their decisions about higher education.

Data Analysis

Data analysis happened simultaneously with the data collection process, which also helped to increase the trustworthiness of the study. Research memos were written after each interview to capture aspects of the students' demeanor that may not have come across in the recordings and made notes about emerging themes. While a conceptual framework was used for other portions of the larger study, analysis for this article came from an open coding process put forward by van Manen (1990) and began with an initial holistic approach, rereading the transcripts as a whole, and seeing if new themes emerged beyond those captured within the research memos. Next, we used a detailed, or line-by-line, approach in which we examined the interviews sentence by sentence. Finally, axial coding helped determine relationships that existed between the codes and collapse them into broader themes.

In addition to triangulating the data across the multiple sources and follow-up member checks with available participants, peer debriefing with another scholar focused on rural students in higher education was used to further build on the trustworthiness of the study. Because this scholar works

with students in a different region of the United States, we were also able to better understand what findings might be specific to the region of the study and what findings might connect to rural students more broadly.

Positionality of Researchers

Ashley grew up in a rural community and worked in new student orientation, helping students transition into higher education, for 10 years before entering a faculty role. Karina grew up and has always lived in urban areas, but has worked in college access programs helping students navigate the college choice process over the past seven years. We share a critical perspective lead us to focus on potential power structures that impact the experiences of this student population and our professional experiences with college choice and student transitions helped in the formation of practical implications for the findings that emerged from the study. Having both in-group and out-group identities also helped us to balance an internal understanding of the population while working to prevent imposing Ashley's personal experiences on the students.

Findings

Despite the diversity represented across the students and the communities they came from, we still found that the students had similar reasons for seeking out a large flagship university in an urban area. Motivations included encouragement from family and community members to pursue a degree from a prestigious institution, interest in a career that they felt could not be supported by the economy of their hometown, and a lack of alignment between their personal values and specific values espoused in their hometown resulting in a desire to explore different worldviews.

Encouragement

Encouragement from family or community members consistently played a role in choosing to pursue their dreams beyond the

boundaries of their community. This included both encouragement to pursue a post-secondary degree in general, as well as, encouragement to seek out an opportunity at this specific institution because of its strong reputation.

Many of the students talked about pursuing a degree as a foregone conclusion in their family. Samuel shared the following about his mother:

She's like, "I don't care where you go. I don't care what you study. But you have to at least get an education, at least as much education as I have," because she got her bachelor's degree.... my dad didn't go to college, so my mom saw how hard it was on him to try to find a job, keep a job.

His mother made it clear that obtaining a college degree was a priority. Kathleen similarly talked about higher education as a foregone conclusion in her family. She shared "In my family, college was always a thing. Like it never was an option... It was just always assumed." These constant messages played an important role in students' decision to leave and pursue a degree.

Isabel also shared that for her parents' higher education was a "done deal. You're going. I don't care where. You're going." She discussed a college preparation center at her high school that encouraged students to pursue dual credit courses as a way to save money on their future degree, but she emphasized that continued motivation from her mother was what really encouraged her to do well in those courses so she would be able to enter a prestigious institution when she graduated. While Isabel was hesitant because of the financial sacrifices that would need to be made to support her at the university, her father continued to encourage her to pursue this great opportunity.

Students also received encouragement from others in their high school and rural community. In addition to the college preparation center mentioned by Isabel, Laura discussed the role of a local Upward Bound program on her decision to go to col-

lege and exposure to schools in larger cities. Outside of these organized programs, Aaron discussed the encouragement that came from his teachers and older students from his hometown. He explained,

I did really well with my grades so a lot of my teachers and counselors would always say, 'have you thought about college yet? Which college are you thinking of going to?' And I feel like just the action of having my teachers and any people in higher authority talk about college, it sort of implanted the idea that college was not really an option, but the next step in me growing as a person.

As he began to decide where to go to college his older friends who had already matriculated at the university shared what a different experience it was to go to a bigger university in a bigger city and once again highlighted the strong reputation of the institution.

For Travis, encouragement came from a professor at the local junior college. He explained:

I had a lot of influential professors at [my junior college], but one was a [university] alum herself and she kept saying like, I think you need to go – you need to go [there], you need to go to [my alma mater], that's the best one in [the state].

Students noted that the university had a strong reputation in their community and enrolling there caused people to think, "Oh wow, you're smart. You've made it." This direct and indirect encouragement from their family and community members played a role in students not only pursuing higher education but seeking out that opportunity at one of the top schools in the state.

Career

For many students, the careers they aspired to were a driving factor for their pursuit of higher education and interest in moving to an urban area. The students had clear career goals that would require at least a bachelor's degree to pursue. Many of

the participants had plans to continue their education and pursue a graduate degree as well. The students did not see remaining in their community as a viable option for pursuing their desired careers. Aaron shared:

I felt like living in the [rural] town was sort of – I didn't really see a future there.

It's a small town so I don't think I could have grown as a person in that town. So it's just more of a starting point for me.

With clear intentions for their future set, many of the students not only felt they needed to leave to pursue their degree but did not see an opportunity to pursue their chosen field in their hometown and therefore did not intend to return after graduation.

Layne shared how her decision to major in psychology was influenced by what she did not see in her rural community.

I saw in rural places mental health isn't really like a big thing...I guess my major was also influenced by like my experiences in my town because I had a sucky time growing up and I want to help kids that are having a sucky time like I did.

Furthermore, her parents told her "you can only go to the big places if you get a legit major or job." Knowing that she wanted to move to a larger city, she ultimately decided to pursue a career as a licensed therapist.

Furthermore, just as many of the students were encouraged by their family and community members to pursue their degree at the university because of its prestige, a part of their final choice to enroll was because of the strong reputation of their specific program inside the larger institution. Michelle explained that she spent a lot of time googling different schools and programs and finally decided that she "really liked the idea of being able to say, 'I went to [the university]!' Like the best place! This is where I went to school. This is where my degree is from." It was the best school for the major she wanted to pursue but she also understood the weight the name of the institution carried more broadly. Kathleen similarly found that the department for her

major was well regarded with lots of opportunities for field and research experiences and she shared, "its academic standing was awesome, obviously, and I wanted to be a part of that." For both women, the careers they were seeking are primarily found in large urban centers. The students often understood that the size and prestige of the institution presented a wide range of unique opportunities while they pursued their degree, which would serve them well in their next steps toward their career beyond graduation.

Career aspirations were a driving factor in the participants' choices to leave their community and pursue a degree. Still, it was not that the students were simply trying to get out of their rural community. Some of the students discussed returning to their hometown someday when they retired. This sentiment revealed that, for many of the students, the purpose of enrolling in higher education was not simply because they wanted to leave where they grew up, but because they wanted to pursue new opportunities that they did not believe would be available to them in their rural community.

Seeking New Values

Despite the varied political leanings of the rural communities represented in this study, each student described his or her hometown as conservative. The students further explained that they described their community as conservative because of the restrictive norms related to gender roles and sexuality that they saw within the community. All 11 students noted that the local churches, Protestant or Catholic, were the primary influence on the conservative values espoused in their community.

Emilia discussed the impact that the local churches had on her community broadly by explaining, "if you weren't going to church on a Sunday people just looked at you a little bit different. There was a pressure to conform to a religion of some sort." She noted a clear pressure that existed within the community to conform to the church-going

culture. Samantha's description of her own town also highlighted the influence of local churches when shared about how there was still a lot of prayer in the schools and that most of the social interaction in the community that was not connected to the schools came through churches.

The participants often linked the strong influence of the church to the conservative views concerning gender and sexuality that were pervasive within the community. Samuel explained, "They're very pro-binary gender in my church. Like that's it. If you're born – if the doctor assigns you male, you are a male until the day you die." Samuel knew that there were likely people in his hometown who identified as non-binary but understood how the community would silence them. The strong messages around the gender binary and sexual orientation that participants received from their rural community led to those who did not fit within specific gender stereotypes or identified as gay or queer feeling uncomfortable being open about their gender expression or sexual orientation within their hometown.

For example, Layne shared that growing up in her town she was often judged for being "tomboyish" and assumed to be a lesbian. She said that many in her town held the view that

'God doesn't like them so I don't like them.' Like that was kind of the attitude they had towards me just because like I guess in rural communities they have a very binary, I guess that's the word, like very strict binary.

She discussed these judgments coming well before she even developed an understanding of her own sexuality. This informed who she eventually came out to later in life when she "realized, 'Oh, I'm queer actually because I kind of like everyone and nothing's wrong with that.'" Knowing the judgment she had already faced from assumptions about her sexual orientation she limited those she came out to in her hometown. Travis and Samuel discussed similar instances as they watched people judge others in their com-

munity as they were simultaneously beginning to understand their own sexual orientations as bisexual and gay.

While these students feared direct judgment from members of their community, all of the students who identified as both cisgender and heterosexual also felt uncomfortable with many of the restrictive ideas around gender and sexuality in their hometowns. The participants felt that their personal values did not align with the conservative norms that were prevalent in their rural community and specifically sought admission to not only an urban university but also one they perceived to be liberal. Aaron explained, "I heard people say [this city] is very liberal as a city. So it definitely attracted me because it was very outgoing, liberal." For students, the opportunity to explore different, more liberal, ideas during their time at college was a part of what drew them to the institution. Furthermore, students discussed leaving their rural community as an opportunity to challenge themselves through exposure to new ideas and grow as a person.

Discussion

The findings from this study align with previous college choice models revealing both internal and external variables that play a role in the college choice process for these rural students who enrolled at an urban institution, particularly within the predisposition and choice phases. The findings also support previous literature that discusses how students' career aspirations play a role in their decisions about higher education (Agger et al., 2018; Demi et al., 2009; Means et al., 2016; Stone, 2018). Scholarship focused on career aspirations can sometimes be presented as students seeking economic opportunity outside of their hometown; however, the findings from the current study echo previous research that reveals these career choices are not always simply about seeking economic stability or advancement, but pursuing careers that they believe will be fulfilling. This is an example of a predisposition and internal

variable that played a role in the students' college choice. This internal factor of the desire to pursue a specific fulfilling career was then coupled with the external factor of their hometown economy not being able to support their career choice and work in tandem to motivate students to choose a prestigious institution in an urban setting.

Another external factor that played into the students' college choice was encouragement from family and community members. Students felt encouraged to pursue higher education outside of the community and to seek out institutions that were perceived as prestigious. This finding echoes the work of Means and colleagues (2016), which revealed the role of encouragement and support in the college-going process for rural African American students. Additionally, this finding is in alignment with that of Tyler and colleagues (2011) in regards to communalism. While Tyler et al. (2011) describe the influence communalism has on keeping students in the community, the encouragement they receive from their hometown may provide students with the confidence to leave and attend college elsewhere.

Still, it is important to note that encouragement to pursue higher education outside of the community may not have been provided to all of the students within the participants' hometowns. As Carr and Kefalas (2009) revealed this type of encouragement and support is often directed toward the top students. Because the majority of the students admitted to the university fall within the top seven percent of their class, the participants were likely some of the top-performing students within their hometown. Though the students primarily received encouragement and support, multiple students did note that some community members cautioned them about going to a university and city that had a reputation for liberal values.

The factor that was most closely linked to pursuing a degree in an urban area was internal. The students felt a misalignment

between their values with those of their community. For the students who participated in this study, it was a tension felt with the values espoused in their hometowns that led them to choose an urban university where they believed they would have opportunities to explore different values and ideologies. Furthermore, while Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note the liberalizing effect of higher education on students, it is important to understand that these students were actively seeking out a space to explore more liberal ideas.

It is also important to note, that while many narratives concerning rural communities are centered around White Republican spaces, the students who participated in this study represented a diversity that exists across rural communities. Though there were students from predominantly White Republican-voting counties, there were also students from predominantly Latinx communities in heavily Democratic-leaning counties and communities that were more racially and ethnically heterogeneous with voting patterns split more evenly between the Republican and Democratic parties. This means, while all of the students discussed their community as conservative, this was not necessarily connected to the political leanings of the community. Again, for these participants, this conservatism mostly centered on norms around gender and sexuality that were primarily driven by the churches in the community. Therefore, while these findings do in some ways continue to support narratives of conservatism in rural spaces, they also reveal a more nuanced understanding of what that might mean. At the same time, this reveals how rural students' interest in pursuing an ideology that better aligns with their personal values can also serve as a powerful internal factor within the college-choice process that may lead them to pursue a degree in an urban area.

Implications

Our findings have several implications in relation to rural student recruitment and

support for rural students on college and university campuses. With one of the consistent reasons students chose to pursue an education in the city being the interest in pursuing a fulfilling career, admissions counselors focusing on rural communities should highlight how their institution can offer opportunities to pursue careers that students are passionate about, not simply focusing on the economic opportunities afforded by higher education. Since many rural students may have had limited exposure to various career opportunities, higher education practitioners should ensure that rural students are connected to university-wide and school-specific career services. These resources can provide students the opportunity to discover and explore careers that align with their values and passions that they may not have had access to in their rural communities.

In addition to traditional career aptitude inventory and exploration activities, career service departments could also include opportunities for shadowing people in jobs that may not have been available or common within rural communities to help these students get a better understanding of the fields they are interested in.

The current study also reaffirmed the important role of encouragement from family and community members in the college choice process, yet noted literature discusses how this encouragement can be limited to only the top few students (Carr and Kefalas, 2009). Admissions counselors should also work with rural high schools to expand this encouragement beyond the highest performing students. Admission counselors can also utilize the concept of communalism by collaborating with others within the rural community, such as community-based organizations, to increase the encouragement students in the community receive to pursue a postsecondary degree. Expanding this encouragement to all rural students does not mean that all students should be leaving the rural community to pursue a degree in an urban setting, but would hopefully reach

more students for whom an urban setting might be a particularly good fit.

Finally, with a desire to explore and be challenged by ideas that are different from those they were exposed to in their hometown, higher education practitioners should connect rural students to a variety of on-campus programming that will help them examine new ideologies and values and offer them supportive spaces and resources to critically examine these new ideas. First-year seminars or themed living-learning communities focused on the exploration of different cultures, belief systems, and power structures could be particularly beneficial for rural students. These types of programs offer exposure to new ideas, while also providing a structure for support and critical reflection. Furthermore, because many students indicated feelings of tension in regards to their own values that might conflict with those of their hometown, additional workshops, and programs catered to help students discuss these differing values with family members and friends upon their return home could be beneficial.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study also offer opportunities for future research. Students in this study all came from communities in the same state, which affects the experiences they had growing up, particularly the influence of churches on the culture of the community. This was a potential difference uncovered through the peer debriefing process. With different cultural influences within rural communities across different regions of the country, the values and ideologies that students have been exposed to or might be seeking out could differ by region. Future research should continue to examine the motivating factors for rural students pursuing higher education in an urban area across different regions within the country to see which factors may be connected to rural experiences within a specific region and which may apply more broadly.

Conclusion

There are a great number of reasons why scholars in higher education should turn their attention to students coming from rural communities. First, colleges and universities turn their interest to rural communities, it is critical that high-quality research is produced to combat inaccurate assumptions that can be made about rural spaces and the people who reside in them. Second, though the percentage of rural students entering higher education continues to lag behind their urban and suburban counterparts, their numbers are increasing on our college and university campuses. Having an accurate understanding of what is motivating these students to pursue higher education, particularly in urban areas, can offer faculty and staff members better insight into how these students are approaching their education and how they might best support them. Furthermore, if urban colleges and universities are interested in recruiting rural students, understanding the motivating factors for them choosing such institutions is important. This will allow institutions to capitalize on these factors in their recruitment initiatives and, once again, provide support to the students once they arrive on campus that can help retain them.

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