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## Exploring The College Enrollment of Students from Rural Areas: Considerations for Scholarly Practitioners

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# Exploring The College Enrollment of Students from Rural Areas: Considerations for Scholarly Practitioners

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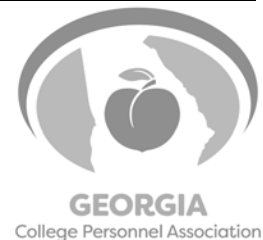
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*Rural students graduate high school at a rate comparable to their urban and suburban peers; however, people from rural areas attend college at the lowest rate. Due to this discrepancy and the ever-growing importance of postsecondary education, this article summarizes and synthesizes works on the college enrollment of students from rural areas. The article begins with background information on the benefits of postsecondary education, definitions of rurality, the educational attainment of rural people, as well as institutional type and attendance patterns of rural students. Next, using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development as a guiding framework, literature about the individual, family, and school factors associated with the college enrollment of rural people is reviewed. Based upon these discussions, recommendations for educational practices are explored, providing ways to promote the postsecondary enrollment of people from rural areas. These sections are then summarized within one table as a quick guide and resource for student affairs and higher education scholarly practitioners. Recommendations for educational research are also included towards the end of the article.*

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Although there has been greater focus on rural America during and since the 2016 presidential election due to voting patterns, rural areas and rural people are still not getting the attention they deserve (Showalter et al., 2019). For instance, there have been some efforts within higher education over the past few years to support college students from rural areas, including added recruitment and student services (Jaschik, 2017; Nadworny, 2018; Pappano, 2018) as well as a recently released metrics classifying rural-serving and rural-located institutions (Moody, 2022; Ross, 2022). However, students from rural schools still enroll in college at rates lower than their more urbanized peers (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015; National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). Thus, more can be done by student affairs and higher education scholarly practitioners to assist this student population on their journey to postsecondary education.

The purpose of this article is to summarize and synthesize existing works on the college enrollment of students from rural areas, and to provide practice and research recommendations for student affairs and higher education scholarly practitioners that is based on this literature. There is an emphasis on the state of Georgia within this article due to the location of this journal, but more importantly because Georgia ranks within the Rural School and Community

Trust's top ten highest-priority states in rural education which is partially due to its low college-readiness rankings (Showalter et al., 2019). This article begins with a background section for readers less familiar with this subject. Next, a review of literature about the individual, family, and school factors associated with the college enrollment of rural people is conducted using Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) ecological model of human development as a guiding framework. The works included within these sections were compiled from searches within the authors' institutional libraries, academic books, Google Scholar, and internet canvassing of government, non-profit educational organization, educational research center, and higher education news websites. Based upon this literature, recommendations for future educational practices and research are discussed.

### **Background**

Before beginning the official literature review portion of this article, background information is necessary to set-up the context and importance of this topic. In the next few sections, the benefits of postsecondary education, definitions of rurality, educational attainment of rural people, as well as institutional type and attendance patterns of rural students are highlighted.

### **Benefits of Postsecondary Education**

First, it is critical to understand the importance of postsecondary education. Mayhew et al. (2016) suggested that people who have participated in college may experience many advantages over less educated people. For example, participating in higher education is associated with increased happiness, improved health, greater civic engagement, and increased community involvement (Mayhew et al., 2016). Additionally, college is associated with enhanced intellectual, cognitive, and moral development (Mayhew et al., 2016). Furthermore, there has been consistent evidence suggesting that as people complete more postsecondary education, their participation in the workforce increases, their earnings increase, and the likelihood of them being unemployed decreases (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

For both rural and urban people, wages increase with greater educational attainment (Torpey, 2018; United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2017). In 2017 the median weekly earnings of people with doctoral and professional degrees were more than triple the median weekly earnings for people who had less than a high school diploma (Torpey, 2018). People “with at least a bachelor’s degree earned more than the \$907 median weekly earnings for all workers” (Torpey, 2018, para. 2), showing the financial benefits of higher levels of

education. This rise in earnings with education level differs based on location, however, with earnings at similar education levels in rural areas being a fraction of those earnings in urban areas (USDA, 2017). One potential reason for this difference in wages is that businesses that provide skill-intensive jobs may be concentrated in more urbanized areas versus rural areas (USDA, 2017). It is important to note that, historically, careers in goods production (i.e., farming, mining, and manufacturing) have been the foundations of rural economies in the United States; yet, farming and mining now provide less than 5% of the jobs in rural areas (USDA, 2017). Currently it is manufacturing combined with three service industries (i.e., education and health industries; trade, transportation, and utilities industries; and leisure and hospitality industries) that supply over 70% of rural employment (USDA, 2017). Therefore, the changing types of employment industries in rural areas, also means shifting educational demands to meet these industry changes. Thus, since postsecondary education is associated with all these benefits and jobs, access to higher education should be available to all people who wish to participate in higher education.

### **Definitions of Rurality**

According to Cromartie and Bucholtz (2008), there are more than two dozen official

definitions of the word rural used by federal agencies. Some of these definitions use administrative concepts, others use land-use concepts, and others use economic concepts to justify boundaries, leading to very different meanings of rurality (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). Some common definitions used in higher education rural research include the United States Census Bureau's definition based on population size, the National Center for Education Statistics categorization of school districts based on population size and distance from urbanized areas, and the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture's county delineations (Cain, 2021). Beyond official definitions, rurality also has socially constructed meanings associated with it (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2019; Reynolds, 2017; Thomas et al., 2011). For instance, place-based identity can have both an objective component based on where people live or have lived as well as a subjective component based on people's self-perceptions (Cain, 2020; Fulkerson & Thomas, 2019). Research on rural people and rural places sometimes uses official definitions, perceptions of rurality, or no classifications at all (Thier et al., 2021). As currently customary in the field, this article utilizes sources that rely on various definitions of rurality.

### **Educational Attainment of Rural People**

Even within varied definitions of rurality, there are statistics that consistently indicate that people from rural places are enrolling in higher education at levels lower than people from more urban locations. For example, the high school graduation rate for students from rural areas was 81% in 2011 (NCES, 2011). This rate was similar to town (80%) and suburban areas (81%), and greater than city areas (71%), meaning students in rural areas are graduating high school at rates on par with their more urbanized peers. The percentage of rural people aged 18-24 who attended college in 2015, however, was only 29% (NCES, 2015). This percentage was much less than town, suburban, and city locales at 41%, 42%, and 48%, respectively. Additionally, the National Student Clearinghouse (2021) recently reported that the rates of college enrollment one and two years after high school graduation for the class of 2018 and 2019 were lower for students from rural schools compared to students from suburban or urban schools. Likewise, people aged 25-29, less rural people (10%) were enrolled in any postsecondary program (undergraduate, graduate, or professional programs) in 2015 compared to all the other locales (12% for town, 16% for suburban, and 17% for city, NCES, 2015).

Furthermore, these national statistics hide how high school completion rates and college enrollment rates are influenced by social identities, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status. For example, people of color from rural areas are less likely to complete high school and are half as likely to obtain bachelor's degrees as compared to White people from rural areas (USDA, 2017b). Women from rural areas are also completing higher levels of education compared to men from rural areas (USDA, 2017b). Additionally, educational attainment in rural areas is negatively related to several economic outcomes, including "poverty, child poverty, unemployment, and population loss" (USDA, 2017b, p. 5). These nuanced statistics highlight why it is important to not represent rural people as one monolithic or homogenous group, but rather to consider the unique intersecting identities of rural people to gain a more extensive understanding of their educational pathways.

Specifically, within the state of Georgia, the rural education landscape is a "serious situation" (Showalter et al., 2019, p. 5). The rural public school student population in Georgia during the 2016-2017 academic year was slightly less than a half million students (specifically 463,129 students; Showalter et al. 2019). According to Showalter et al. (2019), the rural school districts in Georgia tend to be racially diverse,

and the people and communities within those districts tend to have higher poverty levels. Schools and districts in Georgia also tend to be large, however, annual spending per student in Georgia was \$686 below the U.S. average of \$6,367 (Showalter et al., 2019). Showalter et al. (2019) ranked Georgia as seventh within its top 10 highest-priority states, noting "it is the dire college readiness rankings that drive Georgia's overall priority ranking" (p. 103). The high school graduation rate in rural districts was 85.9%, but only 9.4% of rural males and 14.9% of rural females were enrolled in dual enrollment courses, 12.4% passed at least one Advanced Placement (AP) exam, and 41.2% took the ACT or SAT (Showalter et al., 2019).

### **Institutional Type and Attendance Patterns of Rural Students**

The types of colleges that students attend and students' attendance patterns at these institutions are likewise fundamental background information relating to the enrollment of college students from rural areas. People from rural areas are more likely to attend public institutions, attend college full-time, and attend less selective colleges and universities compared to their suburban and urban peers (Byun et al., 2012). Additionally, most rural students who participate in post-secondary education (about 65%) attend two-year institutions at some point in their

college careers, and about a quarter of rural students who participate in postsecondary education (24%) enroll in two-year schools before transferring to four-year schools (Byun et al., 2017). The type and selectivity of the institutions students attend are meaningful because more selective institutions and institutions with higher expenditures have higher retention and graduation rates compared to less selective institutions (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006).

Bachelor's degree completion is also related to the region of the United States rural people are from, with rural people from the Northeast more likely to complete bachelor's degrees than rural people from the Midwest, West, and Southern regions (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018). Completing degrees may also be related to the number of people who enroll in college from those areas. It is important to note, however, that associate degree completion was not significantly associated with geographic region. This suggests regional differences in educational attainment may be due to different occupational options prominent in the different regions of the United States (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018; USDA, 2017).

### **College Enrollment of Students from Rural Areas**

As emphasized above, people from rural areas enroll in postsecondary education at

lower rates than their more urban peers (NCES, 2015; National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). Tran and DeFeo (2021) noted the importance of recognizing rural students' families and communities in their postsecondary pathways because these experiences are "embedded in larger and interconnected systems of social and cultural relationships" (p. 462). Due to the complexity of postsecondary enrollment, a theoretical framework reflective of this phenomenon is necessary. Thus, this review of literature is guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) ecological model of human development. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), human development is influenced by four mechanisms (process, person, context, and time) and the interactive relationships between these four mechanisms. Development is impacted not only by individual factors, but also by factors in an individual's immediate surroundings, factors in an individual's community, and factors in an individual's larger cultural setting (Bronfenbrenner 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). It is necessary, therefore, to consider both individual factors influencing postsecondary enrollment, as well as family and school characteristics.

### **Individual Characteristics**

First, there are several individual characteristics associated with the postsecondary

enrollment of rural people found in existing literature. For example, rural women are more likely than rural men to enroll in college (NCES, 2015; Provasnik et al., 2007). This is partially because rural girls demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement, have exposure to more postsecondary educational preparations (e.g., college prep classes), and are more likely to value schooling relative to rural boys (Meece et al., 2014).

Race and ethnicity also influence the educational attainment of rural people, and there is a growing body of literature on this topic. People who identify as Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Hispanic or Latino from rural areas are less likely to have at least some college education compared to people who identify as White (USDA, 2017b). Means et al.'s (2016) study on rural African American students found that financial concerns and inadequate feelings of academic preparedness both limited these participants' higher education aspirations. Marlow-McCowan et al. (2020) using asset-based perspectives noted how Latinx rural students have high aspirational capital, but sometimes lack equitable access to other forms of capital needed to navigate postsecondary education. Moreover, Henning and Wheeler (2020) noted how some of the barriers to academic attainment for rural students are exacerbated for Indigenous students from rural areas, inhibiting their educational access.

Additionally, rural students' individual perceptions of their academic skills and the courses they take in high school both influence their educational aspirations and their levels of educational achievement (Bandura et al., 2001; Chambers, 2021). For instance, Chambers (2021) reported that rural Black students whose performance was higher than their peers in high school mathematics were more likely to enroll in four-year institutions. Taking advanced coursework and participating in college preparation programs are also beneficial for preparing rural students for college (Byun et al., 2012, 2015); and this influences the courses they pursue in college (Mann et al., 2017). Additionally, participation in dual enrollment courses and college costs factor into rural students' college-choice processes (Cain, 2021b).

### **Family Characteristics**

In addition to individual factors, family characteristics are associated with the enrollment of people from rural areas. Rural youth from higher-income families (Provasnik et al., 2007) and two-parent family households (Rosigno & Crowle, 2001; Rosigno et al., 2006) are more likely to enroll in college. This may be because families with higher incomes are more likely to financially support students with the costs of postsecondary education than families with lower incomes. For example, most of the rural student



participants in Goldman's (2019) study shared that their parents' financial situations were barriers to them attending college. Indeed, the lower socioeconomic status of families from rural areas versus families from urban areas is a major contributor to the discrepancies in rural/urban college attendance rates because rural families may be less likely to afford postsecondary education due to their overall lower income levels (Byun et al., 2015; Wells et al., 2019). Yet, Ardoin and McNamee (2020) also emphasized the diversity in social class backgrounds of rural students and how these varied backgrounds lead to different needs and experiences of students.

In addition to financial support, families influence rural students' enrollments in other ways too. High school students whose parents have higher educational expectations are more likely to have higher educational aspirations, leading to higher enrollment rates (Agger et al., 2018; Bandura et al., 2001; Meece et al., 2014). Tieken's (2020) study, for instance, found that rural parents are important sources of social capital for their students, supporting their educational aspirations and college enrollments. It is important to note, however, that rural people often possess cultural capital that is different from the traditional types of social capital often associated with postsecondary

educational attainment (Marlow-McCowin et al., 2020; McNamee, 2019).

Parental education level completed is additionally positively associated with enrollment patterns for rural students, meaning students whose parents have completed higher levels of education will be more likely to enroll in postsecondary education themselves (Byun et al., 2015, 2017; Schonert et al., 1991; Wells et al., 2019). Furthermore, some rural students report their family as their biggest support in enrolling and continuing in postsecondary education (Goldman, 2019). The desire to attend college can be developed within students by family members at a young age (Flowers, 2021). For instance, all the parents of the first-generation, rural, Appalachian students in Slocum et al.'s (2019) study "communicated to their children their support for the choice to pursue college in ways that created a norm within the family" (p. 28). These parents provided both emotional and material assistance to their students, while financial support was offered when possible (Slocum et al., 2019). Although many parents in rural areas encourage their students to pursue higher levels of education, it is also key to note that many may not know how to navigate the complexities of postsecondary education (Ardoin, 2018; Means et al., 2016; Nelson, 2016)

### School Characteristics

Lastly, school characteristics are capable of influencing the postsecondary enrollment of rural people. Schools in rural areas tend to be less racially diverse than schools in urban areas (Burdick-Will & Logan, 2017), but the percentage of students of color in rural schools varies depending on the geographic location in the United States (Showalter et al., 2019). Showalter et al. (2019) listed the rural diversity index by state, meaning “given a randomly-chosen public school located in a rural district (weighted by school enrollment), and two randomly-chosen students within the school, this is chance that the students will be of different races” (p. 74). The national average was 31.9%, with Delaware having the highest diversity index at 56.8% and Maine having the lowest index at 10.7%. Georgia’s rural diversity index was fifth highest at 49.5% (Showalter et al., 2019). The racial diversity of a school is associated with the likelihood that students in that school will enroll in college for the fall immediately following high school graduation with 52% of students at high-minority schools (defined as schools with at least 40% Black or Hispanic students) enrolling in college compared to 64% of students in low-minority schools enrolling in college (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021).

Students from suburban schools (62%) are also overall more likely to enroll in

college the first fall after high school graduation compared to rural (56%) and urban students (56%, National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). Likewise, public schools with lower poverty have higher college enrollment rates (73%) in the first fall after high school graduation than public schools with higher poverty rates (45%, National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). This is because the poverty levels of schools are often reflective of the poverty within their communities and, as previously discussed, family income is correlated with college enrollment (Byun et al., 2015; Provasnik et al., 2007). Low poverty schools may also have the means to offer advanced coursework and college preparation courses for their students, which are both associated with higher enrollment rates (Byun et al., 2012; 2015). Rural public schools often face economic disadvantage and low achievement (Burdick-Will & Logan, 2017; Lavalley, 2018). Furthermore, poverty and areas of persistent poverty are common in rural areas (Beale, 1996; USDA, 2018; Weber & Miller, 2017).

Receiving college counseling also increases the likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education for rural high school students (Griffin et al., 2011); however, rural students may not have access to college counseling at their high schools (Ardoin, 2018). College information can be obtained from several people; however, since information

about postsecondary education may be sparse in rural areas due to the low number of adults who have college degrees, teachers of rural students have great influence on students' educational aspirations and likelihood of them completing degrees (Molefe et al., 2017; Schonert et al., 1991). Means et al. (2016), for example, reported that school counselors, teachers, and coaches of sports teams attributed to the postsecondary educational aspirations of rural African American high school students.

### **Recommendations for Educational Practices**

Now that readers have a basic understanding of some of the individual, family, and school factors related to the enrollment of students from rural areas, this section will provide practice recommendations for scholarly practitioners to consider implementing at their institutions. These sections are intentionally organized within the same individual, family, and school categories used above. Although this is not an exhaustive list of possibilities, the sections below are meant to be broad recommendations to introduce ideas, encourage conversations, and spark initiatives. Table 1 is included after this discussion as a summary and quick resource for scholarly practitioners. Then, at the end of this section, exemplar initiatives already in place at some institutions are reviewed.

### **Individual**

As noted earlier, there are several individual characteristics (e.g., gender, race and ethnicity, beliefs in academic skills and abilities, and courses taken in school and college prep) that are associated with the postsecondary enrollment of students from rural areas. Student affairs and higher education professionals working with people on an individual level is one way to address rural students' postsecondary enrollment. Although it is not possible to change the demographic characteristics of the students, knowing the influence of these identities can better prepare student affairs and higher education scholarly practitioners to support rural students. Identity development is a critical part of student development and individuals' educational journeys (Patton et al., 2016). Thus, the unique identities and experiences of students should always be considered when making choices about practices.

Alternatively, addressing the other individual characteristics might be where student affairs and higher education professionals can have even greater influence because these factors are subject to change. For instance, educating rural students on the different levels of postsecondary education they can complete (e.g., certificate, associates, bachelors, etc.) and the level of education required for the careers they are interested in allows them to find a postsecondary

program that best fits their needs and interests. Stone (2018) noted rural students may not be motivated by lucrative job prospects, but rather “tapping into these students’ values and passions and explaining how a college degree could help them pursue fulfilling lifelong careers may be more effective” (p. 21).

Working with campus partners to create initiatives to help rural students with their enrollment from holistic developmental perspectives, moreover, might be advantageous because when it comes to rural students, “they may face different and more challenging stressors, but also may be less likely to seek support” (Patterson, 2020, p. 32). Some ideas may include scholarly practitioners connecting with students early to encourage certain high school curriculum, such as AP or dual enrollment options, as well as building students’ confidence in their academic skills and seeing college as an option for the future. Additionally, the registrar’s office can host workshops and walk-in appointments on how dual enrollment credits and AP scores count toward a student’s degree completion. It is also imperative to share this information with as little higher education jargon as possible because many rural students, especially from poor or working-class backgrounds, may possess different linguistic capital than college professionals (Ardoin, 2018; Ardoin & McNamee, 2020).

## **Family**

Rural students’ families can also significantly influence their educational pathways through income levels, parental education levels, educational expectations, and familial support. Therefore, higher education professionals should work within their functional areas to provide rural families with knowledge and resources to aid with various types of familial support, including financial and emotional support.

Some practice ideas within this dimension might include the work of financial aid personnel. Financial aid counselors can assist in counseling families to understand the importance of the FAFSA and how to complete it, explain financial aid vocabulary, educate students about institution-specific scholarship opportunities, facilitate entrance counseling for those using student loans, and so much more. Some of the reasons families, especially low-income families, may have trouble completing and submitting their student’s FAFSA include: not knowing the FAFSA exists; missing the deadline to submit it; thinking they do not have financial need; lacking awareness and information about financial aid; being deterred by the cost of college and the thought of taking on debt; being discouraged by the complexity of the FAFSA form and process; and facing these barriers year after year due to FAFSA renewal (Hodara, 2017; Sallie Mae, 2022).

Thus, these factors should be kept in mind when working with rural students and their families.

Emotional support and encouragement for postsecondary education are also key factors in rural students' educational pathways (Flowers, 2021; Goldman, 2019, Slocum et al., 2019). Higher education scholarly practitioners should not only focus their recruitment attention on students, but also the families of students. Providing opportunities for families to visit college campuses at little to no cost to them or having college personnel attend rural school and community events to promote both a specific institution and the benefits of postsecondary education in general, are ways to promote parental support of higher education. Alternatively, virtual options, like virtual tours and online meetings, may also be helpful to connect rural students and families to colleges with less associated costs. Within all of these interactions, the concerns of parents regarding having their child attend college as well as the value of a college education may be key topics to discuss.

### **School**

There are additionally several practice implications that are potentially relevant for student affairs and higher education scholarly practitioners related to rural students' school-level influencers of enrollment (e.g., diversity

level, location, poverty level, and college counseling as well as adult mentorship). Harmon (2017) noted how collaborations between colleges and schools are a promising solution to rural educational challenges. These partnerships can benefit rural schools, higher education institutions, and students alike. Campus visits, guest speakers, and college fairs, for example, can be effective ways for local institutions to expose students in rural areas to the options they have for a postsecondary education. Furthermore, collaborations between higher education institutions, rural schools, and community organizations to provide school-linked services (e.g., afterschool and summer programs, health and mental health services, leadership development, family engagement initiatives, etc.) may be crucial for the success of students in academics and beyond (Bronstein & Mason, 2016). For instance, the Binghamton University Community Schools program builds "bridges between community resources, placing the school at the core of the community, to support youth, families, and neighborhoods within and beyond the doors of the classroom" (Binghamton University, n.d.). The creation of more of these types of bridge program partnerships between higher education institutions and schools in other rural areas may provide evidence-based strategies for success. An example of bridge program in Georgia is the Bridge Scholars

Program at Georgia College & State University. The Bridge Scholars Program is for first-year applicants who demonstrate potential for success in college, but who the school feels would benefit from a transitional support program in order to maximize their achievements during their time at the institution (Georgia College, 2022). Students partake in activities such as community service projects, workshops, as well as peer mentoring and tutoring. The program starts with a five-week residential program to assist students with their transition from high school to college, and if students successfully complete the residential portion, they are under the guidance of the Bridge Scholars Program

their entire freshman year (Georgia College, 2022).

On a smaller scale, admissions counselors can also collaborate with rural school counselors and teachers to encourage students in their pursuit of a postsecondary degree. After establishing ways to connect, resources (e.g., as application fee waivers, campus open houses dates) and guidance can be provided to rural students and their school support systems. College counseling and adult mentorship at schools is especially critical in rural areas in general because only 29% of adults have postsecondary degrees (NCES, 2015). Thus, school personnel may be among few others who have college experience in some rural areas

**Table 1**

*A Quick Guide on the College Enrollment of Students from Rural Areas*

<b>Level</b>	<b>College enrollment factors</b>	<b>Practice recommendations</b>
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Race and ethnicity</li> <li>• Beliefs in academic skills and abilities</li> <li>• Courses taken in school and college prep</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity development and attuning to the uniqueness of students and their experiences</li> <li>• Alignment of degree programs and students' interests and career goals</li> <li>• Enrollment from holistic developmental perspectives</li> </ul>
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Income</li> <li>• Parental educational expectations</li> <li>• Parental education level</li> <li>• Family support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge and resources for rural families relating to financial and emotional support</li> </ul>

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School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity level</li> <li>• Location</li> <li>• Poverty level</li> <li>• College counseling and adult mentorship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher education institutions, rural schools, and community organizations partnerships</li> <li>• Outreach to school counselors and teachers</li> </ul>
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### Exemplar Initiatives

Given the information shared above, there are a few exemplary initiatives already helping college students from rural areas. For instance, a Georgia institution that is taking on a significant role in the care of their rural students is the University of Georgia (UGA). The ALL Georgia Program was established Fall 2018 at UGA, and “supports all rural students at UGA with a network of resources and common experiences and provides unique programs and opportunities to a cohort of ALL Georgia Scholars” (University of Georgia, 2021, para. 1). ALL Georgia is under the university’s Division of Academic Enhancement and offers students opportunities to learn and grow through their Thrive (four-week residential program) or Dawg Camp (nationally recognized orientation program) programs, exclusive course offerings, and learning projects and leadership programs as early as their second year. The ALL Georgia Program also nominates rural students for their ALL Georgia Scholars scholarship program, awarding six students a year. Offering specialized support like this is critical in ensuring the academic and personal development of our rural students within our

institutions. Another initiative through the University of Georgia is the Georgia College Advising Corps. This program places recent college graduates in high schools to work on-one with students on college admissions processes, aiming to increase the number of low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students who attend and complete postsecondary education (University of Georgia, n.d.).

Initiatives rural students can benefit from are also found at the federal level in the form of TRIO programs. In order to be eligible to participate in any TRIO program, students must be first-generation and/or come from a low-income household, two characteristics common among people from rural areas. High school-aged TRIO participants are provided with fee waivers for both college applications and SAT/ACT, assistance with the completion of FAFSA, college applications, and SAT/ACT registration, as well as frequent college visits and cultural field trips, just to name a few services. The role that federal TRIO programs hold is important to these students and schools because smaller and lower-income school districts do not always have the resources to provide college

and career counseling to their students. Specific TRIO programs, such as the Educational Opportunity Center (EOC), offer many similar services, but with an emphasis on serving nontraditional students, such as adult learners. EOC is also a great opportunity for both parents and/or guardians to start a postsecondary education alongside their student.

### **Recommendations for Educational Research**

The neglect of rurality within educational literature and policies inhibits the support of rural students and rural educational institutions (Lavalley, 2018; Showalter et al., 2019). There are several recommendations related to research for scholarly practitioners in student affairs and higher education that are necessary in moving a rural research agenda forward in the years to come.

As seen in this review of literature on the college enrollment of students from rural areas, this topic is complex. Rural education research, therefore, should also reflect the diversity of rural people and the complications of multiple levels of influence on educational pathways. For instance, Sorgen and Rogers (2020) noted limited research on queer college students from rural areas as one example of a topic area in need of future studies. One way to avoid these simplified understandings of rural people is to employ

more critical frameworks to research studies. Using theories and frameworks, such as critical race theory, intersectionality, and queer theory, will guide scholars in deepening their inspection of not only positionalities, but power dynamics.

It is also essential that future research on rural education research clearly identifies the meaning of *rural* being used in studies. For instance, in a review of 524 rural education articles, Thier et al. (2021) found only 30% gave a definition of what made their settings rural; and this practice was twice as likely in articles published in rural-focused journals. The lack of definitions within rural scholarship is potentially problematic because depending on the definitions used, there are implications to items like population size, access to resources, and demographic characteristics. For instance, Manly et al. (2020) found that conclusions about college completion were altered based on how rurality was defined within analyses.

Finally, continued research about the college enrollment and experiences of college students from rural areas is necessary. By conducting more quantitative and qualitative studies about college enrollment and college experiences, the field will continue to discover more about this distinct population of college students. By continuing to gain more knowledge about a greater diversity of college students from various rural areas



attending various higher education institutions, educators can have more nuanced understandings and more purposeful practice techniques in the future.

### **Conclusion**

As rural students are establishing or finalizing their postsecondary plans, student affairs and higher education scholarly practitioners must be ready to anticipate and meet the needs of these students even before they reach campus. Students will interact with countless faculty, staff, and administrators on their future campuses, and it is best to know in advance how to help these students succeed if they are to show up for their first semester (and return for future semesters). This article, therefore, reviewed literature on

the college enrollment of students from rural areas, describing individual, family, and school factors associated with students' postsecondary enrollment. This review demonstrated the complexity of this issue and why multifaceted solutions are necessary to support the educational pathways of diverse rural students. Thus, based upon both of these topics, opportunities for future educational practices, exemplary initiatives, and research considerations were reviewed as a starting point to spark new practices and scholarship that centers rural students and their needs. With the correct supports in place, scholarly practitioners can create positive changes by expanding access to postsecondary education for this student population in the future.

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