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Rhetoric or Change? The Role of State Policies and Conditions in Shaping Postsecondary Education Access and Success for Rural Students

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Cover Page Footnote

The lead author of the article engaged in this scholarship during his time as a Richard P. Nathan Public Policy Fellow at the Rockefeller Institute of Government. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Rockefeller Institute of Government.

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Research Article

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Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, increasing attention has been paid to rural communities. For our study, we used a multicase study approach that included five states to study the difference between the rhetoric about the need to focus more attention on rural communities soon after the 2016 election and the practiced reality of state conditions (e.g., policies, practices, constraints) changing to support postsecondary education outcomes (e.g., enrollment, retention, and graduation) for rural students between 2017 and 2021. We collected and analyzed two forms of data for our study, legislative records and newspaper articles. We noted inequitable funding for rural K–12 education in several states. While some state policymakers responded to these inequities, their responses raised questions about the unintended consequences for some of the decisions. In addition, we found state policymakers and leaders have placed increased attention on postsecondary education enrollment and affordability, but we found limited evidence that attention was paid to rural students and rural-serving higher education institutions and to postsecondary education retention and graduation for rural students.

But the real work of making opportunities available to people in tiny communities and isolated spots across the land doesn't get much traction when priorities are set in the halls of power.

—Rex Smith, Editor of *The Times Union*
(2019, p. B1)

For too long, rural communities and rural education often have been overlooked by federal and state policymakers, which is surprising given that more than one in five public school students in the US attends a rural school (Brenner, 2023; Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Showalter et al., 2023; Tieken, 2014; Williams & Grooms, 2016). However, after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the media and pundits noted a potential shift in political capital of rural communities as more candidates and elected officials began discussing and highlighting challenges and opportunities in rural communities (Shearer, 2016). As argued by the media and pundits, federal and state policymakers had to start paying attention to rural

constituents and communities to garner more political support (Kurtzleben, 2016).

Soon after the 2016 election, mainstream media increased their coverage about rural students and postsecondary education trajectories (e.g., Marcus & Krupnick, 2017; Pappano, 2017); stories about colleges and universities offering programs, services, and outreach to rural students and communities (e.g., Anderson, 2019); and state policymakers and leaders' attention to the need to focus on rural students and postsecondary education affordability, enrollment, and graduation (e.g., Anderson, 2019). In light of these notable stories and attention, our team used a multicase study approach (Yin, 2014), relying on legislative records and newspaper articles, to study the difference between the rhetoric about the need to focus more attention on rural communities soon after the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the practiced reality of changes to state conditions (e.g., policies, practices, constraints) to support postsecondary education outcomes (e.g., enrollment, retention, and

graduation) and more equitable postsecondary education trajectories for rural students. We chose between 2017 and 2021 for the time period of this study because it covered the entire Trump presidency and soon after the Trump presidency, which was a time during which the media, pundits, and lawmakers paid heightened attention to rural communities and constituents. Given that much of “education remains the responsibility of states” in the US, we focused our analysis at the state level (St. John et al., 2013, p. 46). We were guided by two questions.

1. What are the state conditions (e.g., policies, practices, constraints) that shaped postsecondary education opportunity (e.g., resources) for rural students since the 2016 U.S. presidential election through 2021?
2. What state conditions (e.g., policies, practices, constraints), if any, have changed since the 2016 U.S. presidential election through 2021 that reflect rural students and postsecondary education outcomes (enrollment, retention, and graduation)?

Literature Review

Rural students are less likely than their nonrural peers to: (a) enroll in postsecondary education, (b) be continuously enrolled in postsecondary education, and (c) attain a postsecondary education degree (Byun et al., 2012, 2015; Koricich et al., 2018; Schmitt-Wilson & Byun, 2022; Wells et al., 2019). These disparities are related to systemic challenges, such as economic considerations, that lead to inequitable postsecondary education trajectories for rural students (Koricich et al., 2018; Wells et al., 2019). Researchers have often examined how individual, K–12, college/university, and community factors have shaped postsecondary education access, transition, enrollment, and attainment for rural students (Boettcher et al., 2022; Crumb et al., 2021; Grant & Kniess, 2023; Hudacs, 2020; Kryst et al., 2018; Means, 2019; Means et al., 2016; I. A. Nelson, 2016; Roberts & Grant, 2021; Schmitt-Wilson & Byun, 2022). However, less attention has been paid to how state policies and conditions shape postsecondary education opportunity for rural students.

While the impact of state-level contexts on postsecondary education opportunity for rural students is understudied, researchers have found that state policies, conditions, and political cultures shape postsecondary education costs and affordability and

outcomes (enrollment, retention, and graduation; Doyle, 2023; Febey & Louis, 2008; Heck et al., 2014; Li, 2017; Rine & Brown, 2023; Tandberg & Gándara, 2023). Additionally, states play a role in “funding institutions, providing financial aid to students, providing oversight of institutions, holding institutions accountable for specific outcomes, and implementing policies to address state goals” (Tandberg & Gándara, 2023, pp. 279–280). However, each state in the US has a different approach to its oversight and support of higher education (Heck et al., 2014; Tandberg & Gándara, 2023). For example, Heck and colleagues (2014) found that political culture shapes approaches to state appropriations for higher education funding, which influences student graduation rates.

State policy and conditions have a direct impact on rural education (Johnson & Zoellner, 2016). Current research has primarily focused on how state policy and conditions shape rural K–12 education. Researchers have highlighted how state policy does not take into consideration how policies may differently impact urban, suburban, and rural K–12 schools and districts, treating all schools and districts as a monolith (Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Tieken, 2014; Williams & Grooms, 2016). Researchers have also emphasized the importance of understanding how circumstances across rural schools and districts in the same state can vary drastically based on several conditions, such as local labor markets and district revenues (Burrola et al., 2023).

However, limited literature exists that focuses on postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and graduation for rural students. For example, researchers have examined how state policies and programs related to dual enrollment have supported rural students’ enrollment in higher education (Cain, 2021; Rivera et al., 2019; Zinth, 2014). Additionally, Collins and Rockey (2024) examined how state policy in Illinois impacted postsecondary opportunity for rural communities of color in the state, finding that Illinois state policymakers overlooked the intersection of rurality and race/racism when developing and implementing policies related to postsecondary education opportunity. More scholarship is needed to understand how state policymakers consider rurality when developing and implementing policies to improve postsecondary education opportunity and outcomes in their states.

Theoretical Framework

We employed rural critical policy analysis as our study's theoretical framework. Building upon critical policy analysis (Diem et al., 2014), Brenner (2022) positioned the rural critical policy analysis framework as needed for advancing equity and justice in rural places. The rural critical policy analysis framework is important to counter deficit framing of rural places, interrogate structural inequities in rural communities, and center rurality in analysis vs. an urban-centric analysis (Brenner, 2022, 2023; Crain & Newlin, 2021; Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Sutherland & Seelig, 2022). Brenner (2022) argued for more rural policy scholarship “that is both critical and place-focused” and that “moves beyond a functionalist focus (i.e., does the policy work?) toward a critical frame by interrogating the power structures and moral stances from within which educational policy is conceived and enacted” (p. 37).

Brenner (2022) focused on three elements of the rural critical policy analysis framework: assumption of neutrality, distributive analysis, and rural salience. Assumption of neutrality examines how, if at all, differences across places are considered in education policy “but also examines which rural places and which students and communities within rural contexts may be disadvantaged by the facade of place neutrality” (Brenner, 2022, p. 37). Distributive analysis examines “whether resources, benefits, or burdens of a particular policy are equitably distributed across places or types of places” and how this distribution reproduces or reinforces current and historical inequities (Brenner, 2022, p. 32). Rural salience focuses on if the policy considers rurality, and if the focus draws upon assets or assumptions that perpetuate a deficit framing of rural (Brenner, 2022; Wrathall, 2017). We used rural critical policy analysis to critically examine how state conditions are shaping postsecondary education opportunity for rural students and examine the difference between rhetoric and change since the 2016 U.S. presidential election at the state level related to policies and programs that support postsecondary education outcomes for rural students.

Methodology

Our study is grounded in a transformative paradigm. A transformative paradigm is “rooted in a critique of power relationships, with emancipatory goals of individuals and transformative goals for

institutions and systems of oppression” (Hurtado, 2015, p. 286). Scholars who use a transformative paradigm recognize how power, privilege, and oppression shape experiences, outcomes, and opportunities and center the knowledge of marginalized communities (Hurtado, 2015). Our study reflects a transformative paradigm in two ways. First, we centered the knowledge of students from rural communities by using a participatory approach—a partnership between researchers and individuals who were potential beneficiaries of the research—to study and address social issues (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; McIntyre, 2008). Specifically, our team was comprised of researchers and undergraduate students from rural communities and/or who attended a rural-serving postsecondary education institution (Koricich, 2022). Our team worked together as coresearchers on the project. By including individuals who were directly impacted by how state policy and context shape postsecondary education opportunities and outcomes (enrollment, retention, and graduation), our team was enriched by learning from their critical lived experiences and expertise and by beginning to collectively envision how state policymakers and leaders could advance postsecondary education opportunity for rural students. Second, drawing upon our theoretical framework, we interrogated how power structures (e.g., state policy) promote and/or hinder (or remain silent about) postsecondary education opportunity and outcomes for rural students.

Research Design, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

Our research team used a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2014). A case study approach focuses on the in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within and across real-world, bounded contexts (Yin, 2014). For our study, we focused on five states as our bounded contexts: Georgia, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. Georgia, New York, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania are in the top 10 states with the largest population of rural public K–12 school students, and Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina were identified as three of 10 highest priority states in needing to address rural education challenges (Showalter et al., 2019). Each state has a different political context related to which political party had control of the governor's office and legislative branch (see Table 1, online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol>

45/iss3/). Each state was represented by at least one student undergraduate coresearcher.

For our data collection and analysis, we relied on document analysis, a process for selecting, reviewing, and interpreting documents to examine a phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis can be used in combination with other research methods (e.g., interviews, observations) or as a stand-alone method in a research study (Bowen, 2009). We chose to use document analysis as a stand-alone method to track “change and development” related to how state policy and context shaped postsecondary education opportunities and outcomes for rural students over a five-year period (Bowen, 2009, p. 30).

We collected two forms of documents, legislative records and newspaper articles, during fall 2022. We chose between 2017 and 2021 to examine how state context and policy shaped postsecondary education opportunity and outcomes for rural students. To gather legislative records, we used *Open States* (now *Plural*), a database that tracks legislation for each state. We also gathered newspaper articles by selecting the two largest newspapers by circulation in each state to track what was happening statewide related to postsecondary education opportunity and outcomes for rural students (see Table 2, online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3>). We chose to exclude newspapers that had more of a national vs. state focus (e.g., *The New York Times*). We used the following key search terms to identify legislative records and newspaper articles: “rural students,” “rural” and “education”, “college enrollment”, “college graduation”, “college completion”, “higher education enrollment”, and “higher education graduation.” Each document was then evaluated for its relevancy to rural students and/or higher education. Across the five states, we identified a total of 236 documents.

For data analysis, we assigned two members from the team to conduct document analysis for each state, treating each state as a case (Yin, 2014). Everyone was asked to review each article and legislative record for their assigned state and document any significant statements and pertinent information related to how state policies and context were shaping postsecondary education enrollment, graduation, and retention for rural students between 2017 and 2021. During spring 2022, each state analysis team met to discuss and finalize themes for their state based on their individual data analysis. We then engaged in a cross-case analysis to identify key themes across the five states (Yin, 2014).

Trustworthiness

At the time of data collection and analysis, our team consisted of nine undergraduate and graduate students who either grew up in a rural community or attended a rural-serving college or university. While the faculty researcher on the team did not grow up in a rural community, he has had a strong commitment to rural education for over a decade; most of his interest in rural education stems from being raised by grandparents who were born and raised in the rural U.S. South during the 1930s and 1940s and whose educational opportunities were limited because of the intersection of anti-black racism (e.g., Jim Crow laws), classism, and placed-based inequities. As a research team, we worked together to learn more about each other’s positionality and engage in critical reflection throughout the course of the project. In addition, at least two research team members analyzed the data sources, establishing researcher triangulation (Merriam, 2002).

Study Parameters

We identified four study parameters. First, while we relied on two forms of documents (i.e., legislative records and newspaper articles), we did not use other forms of qualitative data, such as interviews or observations. Nevertheless, our findings provide some critical insights into how state policy and context are shaping postsecondary education opportunity and outcomes for rural students and changes over the course of five years. Second, stories and topics do not always receive coverage due to a variety of reasons (e.g., public interest, a shrinking staff that makes coverage of a wide range of topics more difficult, unconscious bias that leads to topics not receiving coverage). Thus, newspapers may not fully capture all the emerging state policies and initiatives that address postsecondary education enrollment, retention, and graduation for rural students. Third, we focused only on five states to compare across the cases more successfully. We recognize that our findings are shaped by the states we chose for the study. Fourth, we collected documents across two years during which the COVID-19 pandemic was dominant in newspaper articles, including newspaper articles focused on rural students and/or higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic shaped many of our study findings.

Findings

We have identified the following themes across our five state cases: (a) inequitable resources and opportunities for rural students and (b) postsecondary education enrollment declines and responses from state policymakers and educational leaders.

Inequitable Resources and Opportunities for Rural Students

Rural schools and students experience inequitable access to resources and opportunities, which impacts their postsecondary education trajectories. Across our data sources, we found evidence of inequities related to rural school district funding, academic resources, postsecondary education opportunities, and broadband access. In this section, we present two subthemes: (a) academic resources and opportunities and (b) broadband access.

Academic Resources and Opportunities for Rural Students

Rural students' postsecondary education trajectories can be hindered by limited access to academic resources and opportunities in K–12 education. In our analysis, we noted inequitable funding for rural K–12 education in several states, including Georgia, New York, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina (Bump, 2017b; Hanna et al., 2021; Salzer, 2020). These funding inequities can have larger implications for rural school districts' ability to provide adequate personnel support (teachers and staff) and academic resources (academic course offerings, such as Advanced Placement [AP] courses), especially for school districts that must turn to local property tax revenue when faced with state spending reductions (e.g., Bump, 2017b; Salzer, 2020). For example, 34 poor, rural school districts that serve a significant population of Black students in South Carolina sued the state for lack of financial resources, and the state supreme court sided with the school districts, ordering state legislators to improve conditions and opportunities for the districts (Adcox, 2018). In response, South Carolina policymakers established the South Carolina Promise Scholarship, which covers up to \$2,000 per year for students from the 34 districts to pursue a technical degree (Adcox, 2018). However, the South Carolina Promise Scholarship is only applicable for technical and community colleges, which may signal to students

across these 34 rural South Carolina school districts that these postsecondary education institutions are what policymakers believe are “right/possible for them” (Adcox, 2018; Iloh, 2018, p. 238).

Policymakers or educators' signals about which higher education institutions are “right/possible” for rural students can perpetuate spatial inequities in higher education. For example, Stirgus (2018) reported on how many prominent colleges and universities are recognizing their low enrollment of rural students, but many institutions continue to have too few rural college students compared to the rural student population in their states.

Based on our data, Georgia policymakers in particular responded to inequitable higher education opportunities for K–12 rural students by focusing on AP courses and exams and dual enrollment. For example, Georgia policymakers focused on increasing the number of Georgia students who took AP exams in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). If students score high enough on AP exams, they might earn college credit. In 2017, Georgia policymakers passed legislation that would subsidize the cost of any STEM AP exams for every Georgia student (Tagami, 2017). However, the decision to only include STEM AP exams may contribute to the undervaluing of liberal arts and the humanities (Tagami, 2017). Georgia state policymakers included \$600,000 in the budget to “help poor, rural school districts add AP STEM courses” (Tagami, 2017, p. 1A).

In addition to support for AP courses, Georgia policymakers have focused on dual enrollment. Dual enrollment in Georgia previously provided an opportunity for any high school student to take as many college courses as possible at no cost to students and families. Over time, the number of Georgia students taking dual enrollment courses increased significantly, expanding the budget for dual enrollment from \$48 million and a student enrollment of approximately 36,000 in 2016 to a budget of \$104 million and a student enrollment of approximately 52,000 in 2019 (Stirgus, 2020). The increasing costs of dual enrollment led to the passing of House Bill 444 in Georgia, which restricted dual enrollment only to 10th graders who are taking classes at technical colleges, to 11th and 12th graders in high school taking classes at technical colleges and/or universities, and to a total of 30 college credit hours at no cost to students and their families (Augusta Chronicle, 2020; Stirgus, 2020). The change was critiqued due to the likelihood of impacting “rural

students most, since rural school districts have a harder time recruiting teachers for Advanced Placement courses. That causes more students to seek dual enrollment courses at local colleges” (Stirgus, 2020, p. 1B).

“Broadband Deserts”: Implications for Rural Student Success

Across the five states, lack of broadband access has created and perpetuated educational inequities for rural schools and students (Barton, 2019; Cueto, 2020; Daprile, 2020; Hinchey, 2020; Ninan, 2021; Schiferl, 2020a, 2020b; Sheinin, 2017). These rural areas that lack high-quality broadband access for homes, schools, and businesses are described as “broadband deserts” (Sheinin, 2017, para. 4). While in some states all public schools may have high-quality broadband access, many rural homes continue to lack broadband access (Barton, 2019; Sheinin, 2017). For example, Sheinin (2017) reported that only 63% of rural Americans have broadband access. While access was a challenge prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic exacerbated educational inequities for rural students in K–12 and postsecondary education due to limited or no broadband access (Augusta Chronicle, 2020; Cueto, 2020; Daprile, 2020; Schiferl, 2020b). At the start of the pandemic when schools and colleges and universities moved to remote learning, some rural students had limited or no broadband access to engage in remote instruction, complete assignments, or communicate with teachers and professors (Cueto, 2020; Daprile, 2020; Hinchey, 2020; Schiferl, 2020b). For example, in one article from *The State* in South Carolina, Cueto (2020) reported that over 16,000 South Carolina public-school students could not be reached upon moving to remote learning in March 2020.

In response to inadequate broadband access in rural communities, K–12 districts and postsecondary education institutions, as well as state policymakers, have called for and attempted to address broadband access challenges (Nussbaum & Cline, 2020; Schiferl, 2020a). One approach has been for some university systems and colleges and universities to be more flexible (e.g., Hans, 2021). For example, University of North Carolina System colleges and universities allowed students to remain on campus during the transition to remote learning, recognizing some students could not return home or lacked the resources, such as broadband access, to continue to

engage in coursework (Hans, 2021). However, wide-reaching infrastructure change is required to address and hopefully eradicate broadband deserts.

Some state legislatures have taken steps to address broadband deserts (Nussbaum & Cline, 2020). For instance, over 500,000 Georgia households lack reliable broadband access, and 70% of these homes are in rural Georgia (Nussbaum & Cline, 2020). In response to this challenge, the Georgia General Assembly passed and Governor Brian Kemp signed the Broadband Opportunity Act, which went into effect January 1, 2021 (Nussbaum & Cline, 2020). The Broadband Opportunity Act requires Georgia utility companies “to charge fair and reasonable pole attachment rates to broadband competitors, such as Comcast, AT&T and others,” with the goal of increasing high-quality broadband access for homes and business across Georgia, especially rural Georgia (Nussbaum & Cline, 2020, p. A5). On a federal level, President Joe Biden signed into law the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in November 2021; the package included funding to address broadband access across the country. While it is too early to understand the impact of this funding on broadband access in rural America, the funding holds promise for addressing broadband deserts that disproportionately affect rural communities, families, and students.

Considering Rurality? Declining Postsecondary Education Enrollment and State Policy

State policymakers and leaders increased their attention on postsecondary education enrollment and affordability. However, we found little attention to rural students and rural-serving higher education institutions and to postsecondary education retention and graduation. In this section, we present two subthemes: (a) postsecondary education enrollment declines and (b) state responses to postsecondary education declines that center rural students and rural-serving institutions.

Postsecondary Education Enrollment Declines

We found evidence of concerns about postsecondary education enrollment declines (Bump, 2017a; Hamilton, 2017; P. Nelson, 2021; Silberstein, 2021; Snyder, 2019, 2021; Stirgus, 2020; Taber-Thomas, 2020). This topic was particularly noted in New York and Pennsylvania before the COVID-19 pandemic (Bump, 2017a; Hamilton, 2017; P. Nelson, 2021; Silberstein, 2021; Snyder, 2019), with citations

of decreasing birth rates in these states and increasing postsecondary education costs as culprits for postsecondary education enrollment declines (Bump, 2017a; P. Nelson, 2021; Silberstein, 2021; Snyder, 2019). For example, articles highlighted how the State University of New York (SUNY) System enrollment and student enrollment at private colleges and universities in New York had started to decline prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hamilton, 2017; P. Nelson, 2021). Additionally, newspaper articles discussed how the 14 institutions in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) had a declining student enrollment for over a decade (Snyder, 2019, 2020, 2021), reporting that enrollment declined by about 26% since 2010 and “about a \$36 million loss in revenue” due to declining student enrollment (Snyder, 2021, p. 10).

The postsecondary education enrollment declines were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (P. Nelson, 2021; Silberstein, 2021; Snyder, 2020, 2021; Stirgus, 2020). We found in our newspaper data sources heightened concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary education enrollment for New York and Pennsylvania and for community colleges (P. Nelson, 2021; Silberstein, 2021; Snyder, 2020; Stirgus, 2020). For example, in one source, the authors discussed how enrollment at community colleges had declined nearly 23% during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Stirgus, 2020). In New York, the “state’s 31 community colleges lost an average 23 percent of enrolled students between 2010 to 2019” and community college enrollment in New York continued to decline during the COVID-19 pandemic (P. Nelson, 2021, para. 7). Additionally, SUNY System enrollment had declined by 40,000 students between fall 2019 and fall 2021 (Silberstein, 2021).

While data indicated postsecondary education enrollment declines overall, little attention was paid to postsecondary education enrollment declines at rural-serving institutions even though rural-serving institutions were particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Snyder, 2021; Stirgus, 2020). Even more importantly, postsecondary education enrollment and affordability often overshadowed postsecondary education retention and graduation in state policies, initiatives, and programs. We did document a few examples of postsecondary education enrollment declines at rural-serving institutions. For example, the nine state colleges in Georgia that are primarily rural-serving and located in South Georgia saw a 7% student enrollment

decline in fall 2020 although the overall University System of Georgia saw a 2.4% increase in student enrollment (Stirgus, 2020). A few articles focused on declining enrollment, including declining enrollment at public rural-serving institutions in North Carolina and Pennsylvania (Snyder, 2021; Stancill, 2017). While the focus on postsecondary education declines overall is an important policy issue, state policymakers and educational leaders must also pay close attention to how declines in enrollment may materialize differently across institutions based on location and pay attention to postsecondary education retention and graduation alongside enrollment.

State Responses to Postsecondary Education Enrollment Declines

State policymakers and educational leaders had a range of responses to declining postsecondary education enrollment and postsecondary education affordability issues, including increasing funding for state scholarship opportunities, decreasing tuition at public and private colleges and universities, and consolidating institutions (e.g., Blanchard & Winograd, 2017; Stancill, 2017, Snyder, 2021; Tokasz, 2017). While most of the state policy responses to postsecondary education enrollment declines did not center rurality, we did document a few policy responses that had specific implications for rural students and rural-serving institutions.

NC Promise. In North Carolina, the University of North Carolina (UNC) Board of Governors approved a strategic plan in 2017 to “increase enrollment of rural students by 11 percent, and grow graduates from rural counties by 20 percent” and “increase enrollment of low-income students by 13 percent, and grow low-income graduates by 32 percent” (Stancill, 2017, para. 5). One initiative to address these goals is NC Promise. This program, funded by the state legislature, dropped tuition to \$500 per semester and was first implemented at three rural-serving institutions in 2018: Elizabeth City State University, a historically Black university; University of North Carolina at Pembroke, a Native American-serving institution; and Western Carolina University, a historically White university (Farmer, 2022; Spellings, 2017; Stancill, 2017). The aim of the initiative is to increase undergraduate student enrollment, lower student debt, increase graduation rates, and support the local economy (Brown, 2022). However, some higher education leaders, especially historically Black university leaders, feared the

initiative “would lead to a revenue crisis despite the state Legislature promising to make up for lost tuition dollars,” leading two historically Black universities to decline to participate in the initiative (Farmer, 2022, para. 2).

Since 2018, the three NC Promise postsecondary education institutions have seen an increase in undergraduate student enrollment, including Elizabeth City State University, with a 50% enrollment increase since becoming a NC Promise institution (Brown, 2022; Farmer, 2022), but NC Promise has not been around long enough to give an indication into the other aims and outcomes of the initiative, including “lowering student debt, increasing graduation rates, and spurring local economic growth” (Brown, 2022, para. 11). Recently, Fayetteville State University, a nonrural historically Black university, became the fourth NC Promise institution (Brown, 2022; Farmer, 2022). While the outcomes of NC Promise have been encouraging, questions have been raised about the longevity of the program (Brown, 2022).

Pennsylvania Higher Education

Consolidation. The PASSHE system has experienced postsecondary student enrollment declines for over a decade, leading to significant loss of revenue in the system and financial implications for many PASSHE institutions (Snyder, 2019, 2020, 2021). The declines in the PASSHE system were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Snyder, 2020, 2021). In addition to the pandemic, state system officials pointed to factors responsible for postsecondary education enrollment declines in PASSHE system: postsecondary education costs; dismal state funding per full-time student compared to other states; and fewer high school students nationally and shrinking populations in Pennsylvania, especially rural Pennsylvania (Knox, 2023a; Mamula, 2018; Snyder, 2019, 2021). State leaders have expressed concerns about how financial challenges facing PASSHE would disproportionately impact rural students, students of color, and low-income students (Knox, 2023a; Snyder, 2020).

Due to enrollment declines and shrinking revenues, the PASSHE Board of Governors announced and approved a merger of three institutions (Bloomsburg, Lock Haven, and Mansfield) to form Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania and another three institutions (California, Clarion, and Edinboro) to form Pennsylvania Western University beginning the 2022–2023 academic year (Parish, 2022); most of

these institutions are rural-serving institutions. While each campus was told it would be able to maintain its identity (Parish, 2022), there was reported fallout from students, faculty, and alumni about the planned merger, and the mergers were cited as a culprit in continuing enrollment declines at four of the PASSHE institutions slated for merger (Snyder, 2021). For the newly formed Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania, campuses initially saw enrollment decreases but more recently have seen increases in graduate student enrollment and first-time enrollment (Knox, 2023b). However, questions remain about how the mergers will have a long-term impact on student enrollment given continued challenges related to postsecondary education costs and state funding (Knox, 2023a).

Discussion

The findings within our study support previous research and extend existing research. First, our findings extend previous literature by further documenting inequitable postsecondary education resources and opportunities for rural students. Researchers have identified individual, K–12 school, college/university, and community-level factors that have shaped postsecondary education access, transition, enrollment, and attainment for rural students (e.g., Boettcher et al., 2022; Crumb et al., 2021; Grant & Kniess, 2023; Hudacs, 2020; Kryst et al., 2018; Means, 2019; Means et al., 2016; I. A. Nelson, 2016; Roberts & Grant, 2021; Schmitt-Wilson & Byun, 2022). For our study, we focused on state-level conditions that shaped postsecondary education outcomes for rural students. In our analysis, we noted inequitable funding for rural K–12 education in several states, which can have larger implications for rural school districts’ ability to provide adequate personnel support and academic resources. While some state policymakers responded to these inequities, their responses raised questions about the unintended consequences for some of the decisions. For example, Georgia state policymakers have invested heavily in dual enrollment, providing an opportunity for high school students to take college courses at no cost to students and their families. However, due to costs of the dual enrollment program, state policymakers restricted dual enrollment only to 10th graders who are taking classes at technical colleges, to 11th and 12th graders in high school taking classes at technical colleges and/or universities, and to a total of 30 college credit

hours at no cost to students and their families. The change raised concerns about rural students' opportunities for postsecondary education preparation.

Second, mainstream media have increased their coverage about rural students and postsecondary education trajectories, and state policymakers and leaders have placed more attention on rural students and postsecondary education affordability, enrollment, and graduation (e.g., Anderson, 2019; Marcus & Krupnick, 2017; Pappano, 2017). We set out to understand how, if at all, the attention on rural communities and rural students and postsecondary education trajectories after the 2016 U.S. presidential election led to changes in state policies, initiatives, and practices that better support postsecondary education outcomes for rural students, recognizing that state policies, conditions, and political cultures shape postsecondary education costs and affordability and outcomes (enrollment, retention, and graduation; Doyle, 2023; Febey & Louis, 2008; Heck et al., 2014; Li, 2017; Rine & Brown, 2023; Tandberg & Gándara, 2023). We found state policymakers and leaders have placed more attention on postsecondary education enrollment and affordability, but we did not find evidence of sweeping legislative changes and initiatives centered on rural postsecondary education students and rural-serving higher education institutions. While most of the state policy responses about postsecondary education enrollment declines and affordability did not center rurality, we did document a few policy responses that had specific implications for rural-serving institutions, such as the NC Promise initiative and the consolidation of public universities in Pennsylvania. However, the consolidation of public universities in Pennsylvania may have larger unintended or unexpected consequences, especially given the continuing challenges related to postsecondary education costs and state funding.

Third, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, rural students faced barriers to enroll in a postsecondary education institution and attain a postsecondary education degree (Byun et al., 2015; Byun et al., 2012; Koricich et al., 2018; Schmitt-Wilson & Byun, 2022). In our analysis, we found that the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated inequities in postsecondary education outcomes for rural students. For instance, while the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students from various geographic locales (i.e., urban, suburban, rural), rural students often contended with living in "broadband deserts," which

caused heightened disparities with the move to remote education during the initial years of the pandemic (Sheinin, 2017). While some states, such as New York and Pennsylvania, already faced challenges with declining postsecondary education enrollment, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges with public rural-serving institutions seeing greater declines in their enrollment.

Implications

As a result of our study, we offer implications for policy and research. First, we encourage state legislators to consider how implementation and realities of policies will vary based on geographic context. Thus, we caution state legislators against one-size-fits-all educational policy approaches and encourage them to consider how the implications of policy decisions will differently impact rural, suburban, and urban communities. Second, we encourage state legislators to consider how to provide more postsecondary education resources and opportunities for rural students. For example, a state-sponsored dual enrollment program may be a viable option to increase students' postsecondary education enrollment. Additionally, state legislators should continue to investigate and implement interventions that could decrease postsecondary education costs for rural students; policy interventions that address postsecondary education affordability could increase enrollment, retention, and graduation for rural students. Our analysis also highlighted that policymakers and higher education leaders discussed postsecondary education enrollment a significant amount between 2016 and 2021, but they discussed postsecondary education retention and attainment less often. While postsecondary enrollment is critical to addressing educational equity, we encourage policymakers and higher education leaders to focus even more on postsecondary education retention and attainment.

We offer two implications for future research. First, for our study we used document analysis to examine how state policy and context shaped postsecondary education opportunities and outcomes for rural students over a five-year period. We encourage future researchers to consider interviewing state policymakers and leaders to gain a more nuanced understanding of how state policy and context are shaping postsecondary education opportunities and outcomes for rural students. Second, due to our analysis approach, we did not

uncover as much about how intersecting forms of oppression (e.g., spatial inequities, racism, classism, sexism) were materializing in state policies or how state policies were exacerbating inequities at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. We

encourage researchers to examine how state policies are perpetuating and/or addressing intersecting forms of oppression in postsecondary education opportunities and outcomes for minoritized rural students.

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