THE EFFECTS OF RURALITY ON COLLEGE ACCESS AND CHOICE

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A recent study conducted by Andrew Koricich, an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Texas Tech University, examines the influence of living in a rural community on students’ rate of college attendance and the types of institutions they attend. “The Effects of Rurality on College Access and Choice” relies on data from two national data sets and demonstrates that rural students face meaningful disadvantages in postsecondary attendance, institutional level, and institutional selectivity as a result of their geographic location. The researcher found that students from rural counties were less likely to attend any type of postsecondary education, significantly less likely to attend highly selective four-year institutions, and less likely to attend a research/doctoral university. Additionally, rural students were more likely to attend public and two-year colleges compared to their metropolitan peers. The author discusses the implications for economic prosperity in rural communities given the obstacles to rural students’ educational attainment.

While equitable access to quality postsecondary opportunities for disadvantaged populations of students is a significant topic of research in education, the impact of growing up in a geographically isolated rural community on college access and success has been sparsely studied. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, more than 60 million Americans live in nonmetropolitan areas, with previous research suggesting such communities contain a lower median family income for college attendees than urban locations. The economic challenges faced by rural residents are compounded by a lack of high-skilled local industries, which offers youth minimal incentive to pursue postsecondary education and prompts highly educated individuals to relocate elsewhere. This outmigration of young and educated people, known as brain drain, can diminish the social and economic resources of small, rural communities, reducing the tax base and affecting school funding. Given these contextual factors and the high levels of poverty in rural communities, researchers have found rural residence has a negative effect on college attendance, with rural high school graduates showing the lowest rate of participation in postsecondary education compared to urban and suburban students (Adelman, 2002; Gibbs, 1998).

In order to understand how students’ ability to access postsecondary education and their college choices are affected by rurality, the author utilized data from two large-scale data sets: the
Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002) from the National Center for Education Statistics and the 2004 survey of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). ELS:2002 initially surveyed high school sophomores in 2002 and conducted follow-up surveys with the students in 2004, 2006, and 2012. Along with students’ demographic information, the surveys collected responses about students’ high school completion, postsecondary plans, actual postsecondary choices, and occupational outcomes. Additionally, the IPEDS data includes institutional information on all postsecondary institutions eligible to receive federal student aid. Thus, student records were merged with the postsecondary institutions they attended in order to examine college choice. This yielded a total sample of 12,020 respondents. In this study, the distinction of rural vs. non-rural is based on the federal classification of metropolitan counties as those that contain at least one urban center of more than 50,000 residents.

Upon initial comparison of rural and urban students, the author finds there are significantly more white respondents and parents with a high school diploma in rural counties. Additionally, the average high school GPA was higher for rural students, while urban students had higher average SAT scores. Regarding postsecondary attendance, the proportion of students who matriculate to some form of postsecondary education within two years of high school is about five points higher for urban students. The proportion of rural students who attend two-year colleges is nine points higher than urban students, suggesting that students in isolated communities are less likely to choose a four-year institution than their metropolitan peers. Furthermore, students from metropolitan counties attended highly selective institutions at almost twice the rate of rural students, although rural students exceeded urban students in attendance at moderately selective four-year institutions. The proportion of rural students who attended a research/doctoral university was almost seven points lower than students from metropolitan areas.

The researcher completed a regression analysis of student demographic characteristics and the dependent variables of postsecondary attendance and institutional choice to examine causality. Results of this analysis confirm that females and high-SES students are more likely to attend any postsecondary institution, with higher socioeconomic status decreasing students’ odds of attending a two-year college and increasing their odds of attending more selective four-year institutions. Also, African American students in metropolitan counties are 60 percent less likely than rural students to pursue any postsecondary education.

Turning specifically to rural/urban differences, students from rural counties have odds of postsecondary attendance that are only 84.7 percent of those for students in urban areas. Rural students are more likely to choose a two-year college and less likely to choose selective institutions. The largest disparity between rural and urban students was among most-selective institutions, with rural students only 32 percent as likely to attend as urban students. Accordingly, the author concludes that as a result of their location, rural students are less likely to attend any form of postsecondary education and also less likely to attend four-year institutions, private colleges, highly-selective institutions, and those that offer graduate degrees and produce original research. Consequently, students from rural communities have a lesser likelihood of achieving the same levels of academic attainment as their peers from metropolitan areas.

The author concludes by advocating for various institutional and policy interventions to improve equity in college access for students in rural areas. Federal and state governments should provide targeted grant funding to rural communities in order to support dual enrollment programs and align K-12 and higher education curricula. Additionally, colleges and universities should make a similar commitment to offering dual credit and distance education opportunities to rural students, while also working to recruit and support low-income rural students during
their admissions processes. It is also essential to provide adequate institutional financial aid to low-income students in order to provide equity of opportunity to such students.

A copy of the full report, including bibliographic citation, can be found by clicking here.

This research brief summarizes work published in “The Effects of Rurality of College Access and Choice” by Andrew Koricich of Texas Tech University. This summary is intended for educational and informational purposes as a service to members of the National Partnership for Educational Access. All content in this brief is attributed to the author. The National Partnership for Educational Access is an initiative of The Steppingstone Foundation. The views expressed in this brief do not necessarily reflect those of the National Partnership for Educational Access, its members, or The Steppingstone Foundation.
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NPEA is a membership association that supports the quality, success, and growth of organizations and schools working to expand educational opportunities for traditionally underrepresented students across the United States. Through professional development, collaboration, and the dissemination of best practices, NPEA is working toward the day when all students have equal access to high-quality education and opportunities for college and beyond.

NPEA is unique in two ways: first, our members serve students all along the continuum of grades, beginning in early elementary through high school and college. Second, the diverse membership provides a forum for sharing different perspectives and ideas in order to bolster the field of college access and close the achievement gap that prevents so many children from realizing the benefits of a college degree.

Lack of academic preparation, limited understanding of the complex college admission and financial aid application processes, and rising tuition costs combine to keep millions of capable yet underserved students locked out of the opportunities provided by a college education; at the same time, the demand for a college-educated workforce continues to grow. While many organizations exist to increase opportunities for traditionally underrepresented students, they often work in isolation, struggling with challenges that a program on the other side of the country or even around the corner has already solved. By bringing organizations together to build connections and share lessons learned, NPEA is strengthening the pipeline to college on a local and national scale.