May 2007

Off the Beaten Path: Rural Students and the Pursuit of Higher Education

Ellen Bracken
Macalester College

Honors Paper

Macalester College

Spring 2007

Title: Off the Beaten Path: Rural Students and the Pursuit of Higher Education

Author: Ellen Bracken

SUBMISSION OF HONORS PROJECTS

Please read this document carefully before signing. If you have questions about any of these permissions, please contact Janet Sietmann in the Library.

Title of Honors Project: Off the Beaten Path: Rural Students and the Pursuit of Higher Education

Author's Name: (Last name, first name) Bracken, Ellen

The library provides access to your Honors Project in several ways:

- The library makes each Honors Project available to members of the Macalester College community and the general public on site during regular library hours.
- Using the latest technology, we make preservation copies of each Honors Project in both digital and microfilm formats.
- Every Honors Project is cataloged and recorded in CLICnet (library consortium OPAC) and in OCLC, the largest bibliographic database in the world.
- **To better serve the scholarly community,** a digital copy of your Honors Project will be made available via the Digital Commons @ Macalester (digitalcommons.macalester.edu.

The DigitalCommons@Macalester is our web based institutional repository for digital content produced by Macalester faculty, students, and staff. By placing your projects in the Digital Commons, all materials are searchable via Google Scholar and other search engines. Materials that are located in the Digital Commons are freely accessible to the world; however, your copyright protects against unauthorized use of the content. Although you have certain rights and privileges with your copyright, there are also responsibilities. Please review the following statements and identify that you have read them by signing below. Some departments may choose to protect the work of their Honors students because of continuing research. .In these cases the project is still posted on the repository, but content can only be accessed by individuals who are located on campus.

The original signed copy of this form will be bound with the print copy of the Honors Project. The microfilm copy will also include a copy of this form. Notice that this form exists will be included in the Digital Commons version.

I **agree** to make my Honors Project available to the Macalester College community and to the larger scholarly community via the Digital Commons@Macalester or its successor technology.

Signed Ellen J. Bracken

OR

I **do not want** my Honors Project available to the larger scholarly community. I want my Honors Project available only in the library, **NOT** for interlibrary loan purposes, and **NOT** through the Macalester College Digital Commons or its successor technology.

Signed _____

NOTICE OF ORIGINAL WORK AND USE OF COPYRIGHT PROTECTED MATERIALS:

If your work includes images that are not original works by you, you must include permissions from original content provider or the images will not be included in the electronic copy. If your work includes discs with music, data sets, or other accompanying material that is not original work by you, the same copyright stipulations apply. If your work includes interviews, you must include a statement that you have the permission from the interviewees to make their interviews public.

BY SIGNING THIS FORM, I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT ALL WORK CONTAINED IN THIS PAPER IS ORIGINAL WORK BY ME OR INCLUDES APPROPRIATE CITATIONS AND/OR PERMISSIONS WHEN CITING OR INCLUDING EXCERPTS OF WORK(S) BY OTHERS.

All students must sign here.

Signature: Ellen Bracken Date: 4/27/07

Printed Name: Ellen Bracken

Off the Beaten Path: Rural Students and the Pursuit of Higher Education

by
Ellen Bracken

Advisor Terry Boychuk
Sociology Department
Macalester College
Submitted April 27, 2007

Abstract

On average, students from rural schools have lower aspirations, graduate at lower rates, and pursue four-year degrees at lower rates than students in urban and suburban areas. These differences have often been attributed to lower socioeconomic status and the lower levels of education obtained by parents in rural areas. This study attempts to add to this research by taking a qualitative look at the social norms and structures of rural high schools. How do rural high schools and communities encourage and/or discourage achievement and the pursuit of higher education? What effect does the rural context have on high achieving students with college aspirations? To better understand these questions, college students who attended rural high schools were interviewed about their high school experience and the transition to college. Findings show that these students often went against community norms and overcame structural obstacles in the pursuit of higher education. Effects varied according to the availability of advanced classes and the extent of information and support available to high aspiring students.

Introduction

While the objective of the American high school should be to serve as a common equalizer, schools too often serve as an additional stratifying mechanism. Schools are homogenous across class and racial lines. Students with fewer economic resources attend schools with fewer economic resources, leading to fewer opportunities for those students to excel. Disparities in educational achievement and enrollment in higher education have been rigorously studied over the past century. Researchers have examined the educational success of women, ethnic minorities, and students in poverty in hopes of understanding whether and why achievement gaps persist. Recently, differences in achievement and aspirations between rural and non-rural students have also been considered. Too often these differences are attributed simply to socioeconomic differences between students, and are ultimately ignored as significant indicators of problems within the educational system itself. The role of the rural context as a factor in the lower aspirations of students needs to be better understood and included in the discussion of achievement gaps between rural, urban and suburban students.

According to Beeson and Strange (2003), almost 60 million people in the United States live in rural locations, and about 30% of public schools are considered rural. Thus, the happenings of rural life cannot be ignored. To this day, popular ideology maintains that a divide exists between rural and urban people, and their values and customs are seen as different. However, the extent to which this is true has yet to be understood in the educational context. The school, a vital center of the community in many rural areas, is one place to look for the significance of cultural differences between urban and suburban areas. In addition, more can be done to understand the role that schooling plays in the

lives of individuals and communities. An evaluation of between-school differences can lead to an exploration of the deeper cultural differences present in urban and rural life. Moreover, the often neglected rural school, where issues of class and culture are highlighted in unique ways, is an indispensable resource for scholars who hope to better understand the role of education in America. Unfortunately, much of the research on contemporary schools examines urban schools exclusively.

This study is an attempt to uncover the rural side of the story. Rural schools are small, isolated, and lack the resources of urban and suburban schools. Fewer students from rural schools attend college, and especially elite higher education institutions. On average, students from rural schools have lower aspirations, achieve lower test scores, graduate at lower rates, and pursue four-year degrees at lower rates than their peers in urban and (especially) suburban areas (McCracken and Barcinas 1991; Young 1998b). Yet effective rural schools with high achieving students do exist (Howley and Harmon 2000). One crucial issue that remains, of course, is the reason for low achievement and low aspirations in many rural schools. Socioeconomic factors aside, how does the rural context play a role in fostering lower aspirations in high school students? Another problem involves those rural students who do have goals for higher education and have a desire to receive a competitive education. How do those high-aspiring students go about achieving those goals? What role does the rural context play in helping or hindering those students?

By interviewing eight high-aspiring, high-achieving college students who went to rural high schools, this study attempts to answer those questions and better understand the culture of rural high schools in general. Conversations with these eight students showed,

as expected, that small rural schools have limited resources and few opportunities for high-achieving students. The curricula in these students' rural high schools emphasized learning a skill, the students' rural peers tended to de-value the active search for knowledge, and the administration lacked information about selective liberal arts institutions. The rural communities, in general, encouraged students to stay in the region. Interviewees described peers who tended to enter the workforce after high school, or go on to nearby technical or state schools. Thus, the students in this study proved to be anomalies within their communities; they often independently found ways to circumvent the limitations of their high schools. The attitudes of rural communities and schools dictate that certain paths are more accepted, understood and seen as feasible. In order to achieve enrollment at a selective liberal arts institution, the students in this study made independent efforts outside of their high schools to obtain the necessary preparation for attendance at a rigorous institution. They also went out of their way to find information about colleges that interested them. Through an analysis of these rural students' experiences, this study shows how rural schools limit the post-secondary opportunities of students, and how these shortcomings could potentially be overcome.

Based on the experiences of these rural students, this paper argues that there is a mutually reinforced disconnect between rural life and higher education. Socioeconomics, families, and the structure of the high school are hugely important in determining the post-secondary paths of individuals. The particular structure of the rural high school hinders, rather than helps, high-aspiring students in the pursuit of higher education. And the particular nature of the rural community is also an important factor in shaping the lives of rural students, as the responses of the interviewees in this study show. Students

who go against the norms of the community, then, have a harder time pursuing their chosen path. Higher education institutions can play a role in reducing this difficulty by making an effort to recruit in small, isolated communities. When the students in this study received information directly from colleges, the results were positive. However, once these high-aspiring students reached their goal of higher education at a selective institution, they sometimes faced a bias against rural students in higher education settings. Therefore, higher education institutions must also work to overcome the disconnect between rural and college life.

This paper will begin with an overview of some of the ways researchers have conceived of the rural high school experience and their suggested explanations for lower aspirations in rural areas. Some point to socioeconomic status and the education level of parents, while others see the structure of the high school as an important factor. Next, the methods of investigation for this study will be detailed, and the findings of the eight interviews will be outlined. Consistencies between the students and their high schools, as well as notable differences, will be outlined. Finally, conclusions will be drawn based on the consistencies found in those interviews in order to further answer these questions: What role does the rural high school and community play in fostering lower aspirations in students, and what do rural students with high aspirations do to overcome the structural obstacles imposed by their high schools and communities?

Literature Review

Although a significant amount of research has looked at rural education, many of these studies focus heavily on comparisons with urban schools (which have been thoroughly studied) and not on rural schools specifically. However, these comparisons

can be useful in locating the factors that make rural schools unique. Researchers have conceived of various explanations for the achievement gaps between students from urban, suburban and rural communities. Studies like these help to answer the question: What makes rural schools different, and how do these differences affect achievement and aspirations in high school and beyond? Researchers have approached this problem by looking at three interrelated factors: the demographics of rural communities and families, the structure of rural high schools, and the nature of peer culture.

Demographics of Rural Communities and Families

The unique structure of rural schools can be attributed to the context in which they exist. Major differences exist in the communities and cultures of rural, urban and suburban districts. One of these differences involves class. The socioeconomic composition of the school and surrounding community is the most vital contextual issue to examine when comparing the effectiveness of different schools. Rural communities, on average, have higher levels of poverty and fewer economic opportunities (Kannapel and DeYoung 1999). Some research has concluded that many differences in achievement levels between schools can be eliminated when the socioeconomic status of the students is considered (Haller, Monk and Tien 1993; Young 1998b). Young (1998a) also argues that not only achievement but educational aspirations are affected by socioeconomic status. Despite the weight of these claims, other structural factors must also be considered in the discussion. Class is hugely important, but it remains imperative for researchers to look at the ways schools have furthered the stratification that is already present in the United States.

Family background is always a major factor in research on educational achievement, and there is evidence that rural-urban families and parenting styles differ. First of all, rural parents have lower levels of education on average. This is significant because the educational level of a student's parents is highly correlated with his or her own future aspirations (McCracken and Barcinas 1991). The reason for this correlation is fairly simple: parents with lower educational levels are less likely to stress the importance of education and encourage the pursuit of higher education. Another group of researchers, Coleman et al. (1989), found additional differences in the parenting styles of rural and urban families. They found that urban parents emphasize social development more than rural parents, while rural parents are more likely to emphasize emotional development. Research of this kind shows that the different cultures specific to rural and urban communities are embodied in differences between families. And differences in families and parenting styles are ultimately linked to different expectations and outcomes for high school students.

Despite the generalizations that can be made about rural communities, it must be kept in mind that individual rural communities are often very different from each other. A diverse mix of rural communities exists across the country. Thus, the results of certain studies are not relevant to all rural schools. A good example of this comes from research done by Russell and Elder (1997). These researchers argue that rural students from farm families are better off than rural students from non-farm families. However, Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) make an imperative distinction in their analysis of rural schools: contrary to common stereotypes, typical rural communities are no longer defined by farm life. In fact, they argue that there are three basic types of rural communities. One is the

"Rural Poor," in which basic socioeconomic problems are the main concern of researchers. Second is "Traditional Middle America," which includes wealthier communities that may still be characterized by farm life. Third is "Communities in Transition," in which an influx of suburban outsiders has brought about changes. Many rural communities may be characterized by a combination of these elements, and different struggles come with each one. MacTavish and Salamon (2003) also challenge the idea that rural communities today are static. Economic and social shifts have changed the structure of rural families, communities and schools. Research needs to catch up with these changes.

The Structure of Rural High Schools

Obvious structural differences exist between schools depending on their location in urban, suburban or rural areas. Size plays a role in defining the structure of a school, and size has been a major issue for rural schools in the past decades. According to McCracken and Barcinas (1991), the number of school districts in the United States has decreased by 90% over 50 years due to the consolidation of small, rural schools. While educators and policy-makers at one time agreed that larger was better, new evidence has shown that smallness is better in many contexts. A study by the Rural School and Community Trust (2004) found that smallness was an advantage for certain successful rural schools. D'Amico and Nelson (2000) also found that smallness could be one advantage of rural schools. Students in smaller schools receive more attention from teachers, and more support in general. The consolidations of the twentieth century, then, most likely hurt rural schools as much or more than they helped them. Rural communities were also hurt by these consolidations. Research has shown that small,

rural communities with a public school are better off economically and culturally than those communities that lack a school (Lyson 2002). Government policies of the past have focused on consolidating rather than nurturing individual schools and communities, and this may play a role in the contemporary problems that rural schools face.

Despite consolidations, the average size of an urban school district is still 45 times the size of the average rural district. Suburban districts are also significantly larger than rural districts, although to a lesser extent (Hannaway and Talbert 1993). This major difference has obvious effects on bureaucratic structure and curriculum. One disadvantage of small schools may be a limited number of class offerings. Hannaway and Talbert found that larger size had a positive effect on suburban schools, while it had a negative effect on urban schools. In this study, they were unable to conclusively affirm that rural schools are helped by their unusually small size. It appears that the organization and culture of rural schools was unique and difficult to quantify in this case. At the same time, it remains apparent that small size is a defining feature of rural schools that may alternatively help or hinder student achievement for various reasons.

Another major difference between rural, urban and suburban schools often noted by researchers is the experience level and effectiveness of the teachers and other faculty at these different schools. Carlsen and Monk (1992), for example, argue that science teachers in rural schools are much more likely than non-rural teachers to have majored in something other than science. Beeson and Strange (2003) also report that teachers in rural schools have significantly lower salaries than their counterparts, and that over 60% of them require support from their parents to subsist. Logically, there is no incentive for experienced teachers to work in these schools. And research shows that the presence of

experienced teachers does make a difference even when other factors are controlled for (Goldhaber and Brewer 1997; Klitgaard and Hall 1975). The lack of good, qualified teachers is an obvious disadvantage for many rural schools.

Guidance counselors are also often harder to come by for rural students. A study by Lee and Ekstrom (1987) showed that students from small rural schools (as well as schools with a lower average socioeconomic status) were less likely to have access to a guidance counselor. The researchers went on to argue that those who do not make contact with a guidance counselor are more likely to end up in a non-academic curricular track, and thus be theoretically less prepared for college afterwards. Those who need guidance counseling the most are often the ones who have the most difficulty receiving it, and this fact furthers the socioeconomic disparities in educational achievement and higher education enrollment.

Urban and suburban schools also have the obvious advantage of numerous class offerings. Rural schools in general have limited curricula and fewer opportunities for students to pursue advanced and college-preparatory classes (McCracken and Barcinas 1991). Researchers disagree about whether this has any negative effect on a student's opportunity and ability to pursue higher education. Haller, Monk and Tien (1993) argue that differences in academic achievement that seem to be related to the presence or absence of advanced classes are actually due to differences in socioeconomic status. Gamoran (1987), on the other hand, argues that the presence of curricular tracks geared toward college preparation does have a positive effect on the cognitive development of those students who participate. Although the study does not tie this result specifically to rural schools, Gamoran notes that schools with a wealthier clientele are much more likely

to offer college preparatory classes. Again, it seems clear that schools whose students have a higher average socioeconomic status are better equipped to send those students to college.

Several studies have looked at high-performing but economically depressed "Rural Poor" schools in an attempt to discover their success secrets. One such study by the Rural School and Community Trust in 2004 looks at five small, poor schools in the rural southern United States whose students perform well on standardized tests. One advantage of these schools, the researchers argue, is in the makeup of their teaching staff. The experienced teachers serve as mentors to the less-experienced, reducing the negative effects of inexperienced teachers. In addition, teachers do not leave these schools at the high rates that they leave other rural schools. However, one problem with this study and ones like it is that the researchers do not speculate about the future opportunities of these students. They do note that these schools often have very limited curricula that do not emphasize college preparation. Although students are doing well on standardized tests in these schools, there is no evidence that they will be successful in pursuing higher education or that they have been encouraged to do so by the adults in their lives. Research like this too often focuses on standardized test scores, and not enough on the future opportunities of students. What post-secondary options are available for these students, and which are they most likely to pursue? Who is responsible for encouraging students to pursue certain paths after high school?

Peer Influences

Another aspect of rural school life that has not been sufficiently researched is youth culture in these areas. More research on the influences of peers in rural schools

needs to be done. Studies have shown that schoolmates do have great influence in general. Hallinan and Williams (1990), for example, show that students' college aspirations are affected by the choices of their friends and peers. The negative attitudes of peers towards education can be influential as well. Coleman (1961) was one of the first to notice that adolescents do not value educational achievement in their peers and that they may influence others to fall short of their potential. Similarly, Ogbu and Fordham (1986) argued that in certain minority groups, an oppositional culture exists among high school students that discourages students from putting effort into school work. Another study showed that schools with an above-average percentage of students in poverty may also be affected by a culture that discourages achievement (Farkas, Lleras and Maczuga 2002). Might this effect be present in economically depressed rural areas? This question has not been adequately answered.

The literature on rural education outlines a complicated web of factors affecting the achievement and aspirations of young people. Some of these factors are difficult to immediately control, such as socioeconomic status and the education level of parents. Others could be controlled: more qualified teachers could be given incentive to teach at rural schools, more advanced classes could be offered, and guidance counselors could be more readily available. The influence of peers and the community could also be better understood. How do class, family life and the values of the community interact with the institution of the school in rural areas? In what ways are educational inequality furthered by the specific structure of the rural school? Finally, how do high-achieving, high-aspiring rural students fare after high school? The transition from the rural high school to college is an experience that has yet to be examined by researchers.

Data and Methods

Choice of Method

This study makes use of interviews with college students attending a selective liberal arts institution who graduated from small rural high schools. There is a shortage of qualitative research regarding rural education. Studies have shown that the particular structure of rural schools is difficult to quantify and effectively compare to urban and suburban schools. In one example of a qualitative study dealing with class and childhood, Lareau (2003) studied the lives of individual families coming from different backgrounds. Studies like these are able to uncover nuanced differences that cannot be quantified, and that have been left out of much of the current research on rural education. Because the cultures of rural communities are unique and play a significant role in the lives of students, they need to be studied descriptively. The ways these particular communities and schools hinder and/or help students to achieve in school and to pursue higher education can be assessed effectively through interviews, and rural students who have been through this process have the valuable capacity to answer questions about their experiences. Peer influences, personal aspirations and perceptions of the effectiveness of a high school can all be assessed through interviews. While quantitative data has been able to give a broad picture of the effects of these different factors, first hand accounts can add details that have been overlooked.

Study Population and Sampling

For the purposes of this study, the population included rural students who have succeeded in pursuing higher education and are now attending a four-year, liberal arts college. Interviews were meant to garner information not only about the experiences of

these high-achieving students, but also about their high schools and rural peers. Basic criteria for interviewees involved attendance at a rural high school with a surrounding community of less than 5000 people, and a graduating class around 100 students or less. Sophomores, juniors and seniors were interviewed, while freshmen were left out in consideration of the self-doubt the questions may have produced in less experienced students. An attempt was made to interview students from various rural communities around the United States, but the available sample dictated that many of the students came from locations within a few hours of the college. An attempt was also made to interview both male and female students, but a lack of male rural students at the college left the sample disproportionately female. Because a list of rural students at the college was impossible to obtain, a snowball sample was used in order to find and recruit rural students for the study. The limits to this study's sample are in its small size: only eight students were interviewed. However, the small size allowed for much detail to be included from each case, and the numerous similarities among the students' experiences attest to the relatively representative nature of the sample.

Operationalization

Students were asked a series of questions intended to provoke conversation about their experiences in high school. Questions concerning the school curriculum were of great importance. Students were asked what kinds of classes were available to them and which ones they took. Major questions were: In what ways did your classes prepare you for college work? Where did they succeed and where did they fall short? What kinds of advantages or disadvantages, if any, did you take with you to college that you feel came from your experience at high school? They were also asked about the popularity of these

classes among other students, and whether certain departments were more popular or well-funded than others. These types of questions were meant to give insight into the debate about the importance of college preparatory work in high school. They also give a broad picture of the typical rural curriculum.

Another major subject of discussion was the influence of adults and community members in the students' lives. The perceived effectiveness of teachers was evaluated, as well as the presence or absence of encouragement from teachers in the pursuit of higher education. The presence or absence of the advice of a guidance counselor was also evaluated. If a guidance counselor was available to the student, the effectiveness of the counselor was assessed. In addition, students were asked to talk about the encouragement or discouragement of parents, family members, and community members, and about the post-secondary choices of their siblings. In relation to these questions, students were asked: Did the schools you were interested in recruit at your school? If not, how did you find out about them?

Students were also asked specifically about the influence of peers. What kinds of post-secondary opportunities did peers pursue? In what ways did peers encourage or discourage academic achievement and the pursuit of higher education? This is another line of questioning that would be difficult to adequately quantify and has not been researched sufficiently by past researchers. In areas where youth have generally lower aspirations and fewer opportunities, how do the interactions between them affect this problem? For example, what happens to a student with high aspirations in this context? Students were also asked to describe the typical popular student at their high school, and to name some of the activities that were valued or de-valued by peers.

Finally, students were asked to give a personal explanation for their decision to attend a higher education institution. Questions were directed at understanding the personal difficulties of leaving a small, rural community to attend college. The ultimate goal of these questions was simply to understand the many factors behind an individual's decision and ability to pursue higher education, and to understand the factors present in each community that may have led the interviewees' peers in other directions. Research has given several possibilities for the lower rates of achievement and interest in higher education among rural students. These interviews will attempt to expose the complexities of individual experiences in rural high schools, and the general atmosphere of the rural high school.

Findings

Information gathered from eight interviews with students at a liberal arts college showed some major consistencies as well as notable differences regarding these students' rural high school experiences. The students described schools that lacked funding and knowledge about higher education. All believed that employment, the military, and attendance at tech schools were normal options for their peers after high school, and that if a student did attend a four-year college, it would most likely be at a nearby state school. In each case, only a handful of the interviewees' peers (or fewer) pursued higher education at liberal arts or private schools. However, responses varied somewhat when the students were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of attending a rural public high school. In some cases, the existence of more advanced classes and information regarding higher education reduced the disadvantages these rural students said they now face in college. The social scene also had an effect on students' feelings

about their high school experience and the decisions they made. Although rural schools cater to the needs of their unique communities, the needs of some members of that community are not always met to satisfaction. To varying degrees, the students in this study had to seek out independent study and independently make decisions about higher education with little assistance from the school and community. In addition to these new findings, the findings of previous researchers about the structure of rural high schools, the demographics of rural communities and families, and the influence of peers can be applied to these interviews in order to draw links between the factors and determine the importance of each.

Demographics of Rural Communities and Families

The average population of the towns in which these eight students attended high school was around 1800, with a range from around 500 to close to 3000. The average graduating class contained about 70 students, or between 36 and 115 students. In each case, more than one town or township was represented in the school. One student reported that at least 4 small towns were represented in her school. Another reported that one main town was represented, with students from very small townships making up a small minority of the student body. Thus, the students interviewed came from extremely small and often isolated communities. Many had to travel up to an hour to reach a larger city. To a large degree, then, the students' geographical location limited the possibility for educational choices and opportunities outside of the small community. Finally, despite the attempt to incorporate students from different geographical regions, six of the eight students came from within relatively easy driving distance of the college. Despite the high geographical diversity within the college, rural students were likely to have

come from areas near to the college. This too may say something about the tendency of rural students to stay close to home, and the difficulties they face in getting information about colleges in other regions.

The effects of families on college decisions was somewhat different in each of the eight cases. Most of the students asserted that they were always expected to go to college by their families, and that they had always planned on attending college. Families, however, did not necessarily govern the decision of which college, or which type of college, the students pursued. One student named Caitlin responded that her mother "wouldn't tell me where she wanted me to go [...] I think it's something that I kind of decided on my own." Other students brought up their siblings in contrast to their own decisions. Lisa and Hannah talked about brothers who were going into the military, and Caitlin and Kyle brought up the fact that some of their siblings did not go to college. When asked about how her decision to attend a small liberal arts school in another state was received, Sara noted that her own parents as well as the parents of her friends and the general community thought the decision was strange. Others, such as Laura and Natalie, were encouraged by aunts and uncles to attend college. However, although college was always *important* to each of these students, in many cases their family members did not necessarily see college as imperative. Attendance at a liberal arts college was even more optional, and was something that the students decided on their own was important.

The effect of class was difficult to gather, and each student had a different take on the role of class in his or her community. Previous research has already concluded that class plays a vital role in the educational opportunities of American students, but the purpose of these interviews was to look at more nuanced issues that interact with those

previously established ones. Caitlin saw the diversity of class in her town as a great asset to her own perspective. She saw it as an advantage she had over other students in college who may have only been exposed to people of a similar socioeconomic status. She said:

> In small towns the interesting thing is that you have some really wealthy people and some really poor people; it's such a small environment. It's not like in cities where you're segregated away [...] You all live together and go to school together. In that sense, at least, I'm more in touch with how the world actually is. A lot of [students at this college] have a more distant view of it.

In Caitlin's case, smallness combined with socioeconomic diversity meant more contact with a wide variety of people with different situations, values, and educational goals. Socioeconomic status, of course, affects the opportunities of students from the lower classes to pursue college. Laura remarked that she perceived the lower aspirations of her peers as the result of their lower socioeconomic status: she believed they simply could not afford college, and especially selective colleges out-of-state. On the other hand, Caitlin actually noted that her decision to come to a small liberal arts college was very much guided by financial considerations. She received more financial aid from the private school she eventually chose than from the public universities she also applied to. Again, the effect of socioeconomic class is complicated and was not the main focus of these interviews. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that some of the interviewees did see the role of socioeconomic class as an important part of their experiences in rural America.

The Structure of Rural High Schools

The particular structure of each of the rural high schools played a significant role in the lives of the eight individuals in the study. The availability of particular classes, the effectiveness of teachers and guidance counselors, and the financial resources of each

school were important factors to be considered. While each of the interviewees had different experiences in their high schools, some major consistencies could also be noted. And where differences exist, conclusions can be drawn that showcase the importance of the structure of rural high schools. While many other factors are essential in determining a person's post-secondary opportunities, the structure of these rural high schools played an imperative role in shaping the lives of students.

Many of the students lamented the lack of advanced, challenging classes in their high schools. Not all of the students, however, felt that their school was completely devoid of at least one successful academic department. It was the case, however, that one single department usually far outshined the others, leaving the interviewees with what they felt was a lopsided or incomplete education. Caitlin said that she felt well-taught in English classes, while she also admitted, "I honestly know nothing about history." Anna also felt that there were "huge gaps in the knowledge that's available at my school." Finally, the smallness of the typical rural school meant that classes often included students of all abilities. This meant that many classes had to move at a slower pace and include fewer in-depth discussions and readings.

Advanced options in general were lacking. While three of the eight responded that their schools had around two or three Advanced Placement courses, the other five reported that their schools offered no A.P. classes at all. In one case, Natalie said her school did not offer a single class she would term "advanced" in any way. She never felt challenged in any of her classes, even though she made an effort to take the most difficult ones available. She was also the lone student of the eight who had no options to pursue independent study (whether within her school district or in another town). Another

student, Sara, said that only two classes (one called Honors English and the other a pre-calculus math class), could be categorized as advanced classes of any kind, and that neither was challenging. In the three cases where A.P. classes were available, they were generally limited to one particular field of study. In one case, a school offered two English classes, while in another, only math or science classes were classified A.P. In general, many of the students noted that classes were not challenging, and that most teachers were easy-going.

Resources at the schools also left something to be desired. In a few cases, the students noted that while their schools had limited resources, they were at least better off than other small towns around them. Lisa noticed a huge improvement at her school after a referendum passed allowing more tax money to be designated to the school. Laura's case was the most dire of the eight. She described a French teacher who had to split her time between the elementary and high school, a chemistry lab with old chemicals the school could not afford to dispose of, and a school building far too small for the growing population. Lack of resources also led to scheduling difficulties for many of the students. When a class was only offered once during the day, students had trouble fitting in all of the courses required for admittance into selective colleges. Caitlin had to take a required history class independently so that she could complete college entrance requirements for language study. Lisa had to miss out on calculus completely because it was only offered during band practice, and she had committed herself to band for years previously. In sum, many of the students felt their schools did the best they could with what they had. However, all of them could think of ways in which their schools lacked valuable resources that would have helped them to learn more effectively.

Each of the eight students also gave somewhat similar responses to inquiries about guidance counselors at their schools. Not all were required to meet with a guidance counselor, and in Natalie's case a guidance counselor was not available at all. However, none of the students felt they received any help in the college search from guidance counselors. In most cases, the guidance counselors heavily emphasized nearby state or technical schools. A student named Anna remarked, "For me, my guidance counselor was basically worthless in the college search because she had really no experience in the schools I was looking at." Lisa was encouraged by her guidance counselor to pursue the military. Laura remembered her guidance counselor confusing her with another student, and generally giving bad information. In general, the guidance counselors were not effective sources of information for these students. This may not be a specifically rural feature, but it is relevant nonetheless to these students' experiences.

Despite these issues, some of the students had positive relationships with at least one teacher who helped them in their college search. In one case, Caitlin found out about the school she eventually attended from an English teacher. She had originally planned on applying to only state schools until this teacher brought up some examples of other schools she could pursue. She went on to apply last minute to a few other schools and eventually enrolled in one of them. Laura, too, attributed the achievement of her post-secondary goals partially to one stand-out teacher who was not popular with the rest of the school and community. He was the only teacher who challenged her academically, and he encouraged her in her pursuit of higher education. Stories like these, while not common to each of the interviewees, show that individuals within the school system can

have a positive effect on students, and especially on those with a desire to improve their education.

For most of the students, however, the guidance counselors, teachers and the general community did not have information on the schools they were interested in. As a result, each found information independently in a wide variety of places. Anna found out about new options from a college student she met on a special program abroad. Lisa found information in the Princeton Review, while a few other students were contacted by colleges after their scores on the P-SAT were released. The lone male in the study, Kyle, became interested when the college he eventually chose recruited him for a sports team. In these cases, the outreach of the college itself played more of a helping role than the high school or community. Most importantly, however, the students had to actively search outside of the information readily available in their communities.

In addition to independently seeking information about college, the students also made extra efforts to improve the quality of their education. A lack of funding, options, and information for advanced students led seven of the eight students to seek out independent opportunities that furthered their courses of study. Lisa, for example, felt she received no preparation for college writing. As a result, she decided to independently attend a summer writing program at a college. Sara had only one option for foreign language instruction, and it was in a language she did not wish to study. She opted to take a class in another language at 6 in the morning through satellite instruction. Another student, Anna, signed up for an independent A.P. class that had never been offered in her high school. As a result, her school eventually picked up the class and later offered it to more students. Laura traveled every Wednesday with another student in her graduating

class to take an A.P. English class that was not available at her school. When asked about that class, she said, "I would never have gotten into [college] if I hadn't been in that program. I wouldn't know anything. Everything I know about history, politics, and just living in the world, it's from taking that class." Similarly, Kyle took classes at a community college when he became frustrated with the ineffectiveness of his high school English teacher. In the case of Natalie, no options for independent study or study outside of her high school were readily available, so she tried to take as many of the most challenging classes possible. Many of the students attributed these independent efforts to their ability to be accepted into a selective institution.

It is difficult to say whether these students' experience in school in combination with their high aspirations forced them to be independent, or whether they had an innate independence which made them different from other students and ultimately gave them the drive to go to college. Lisa saw her independence as a direct factor of her rural schooling: "I would say I'm really independent because if I wanted to learn something I usually had to go out on my own and do it." Similarly, Kyle concluded:

> You had to have a certain level of independence to get a decent education there. If you just did what they asked, if I would have just done what they asked, I probably wouldn't have been as well prepared to be here. But I did more than what was asked most of the time.

This was the general sense of all of the interviews. Laura admitted that she felt very lucky to have achieved her goal of attending an elite college given the circumstances she faced in high school, even though a lot of that "luck" involved her own perseverance.

According to these eight interviews, the gender gap between men and women entering college may be exaggerated in rural settings. First of all, seven of the eight

interviewees in the study were female. During the search for rural students at the college, it became clear that female rural students outnumbered their male counterparts by a larger margin than the overall discrepancy between men and women at the institution. All of the interviewees also explicitly stated that they felt women in their high school were much more likely than men to go to college. When asked about the tendencies of her friends after high school, Caitlin observed, "I think only 2 guys from my graduating class are going to finish college." The disproportionate sample within this study says something meaningful about the tendencies of rural students after high school: it was difficult to find male, rural students who were willing to participate in the study, and this may have been because there were very few to choose from.

The rural gender gap in college pursuit could be partially explained by a pronounced focus in rural high schools on entrance into the workforce after college. Traditionally male-dominated classes, such as welding, construction, and other shop-classes, received a good deal of attention and funding at the schools the students described. As Lisa put it, "Our shop department is the best department and best funded department in our school by far. I even took some courses because they were the best classes." Laura's school had an entire building dedicated to learning a skill. Virtually all of the students responded that their schools had shop departments, agriculture departments, and tech departments that were highly popular among students. This popularity meant, of course, that much of the school's money was dedicated to these programs, while other programs inevitably suffered. Many of the students recognized that their schools were simply responding to the demand of the community by organizing this kind of curriculum. If only a few students wanted to take physics, as was the case in

Laura's school, the class was cut. But because students and the community demanded and valued learning a skill, the shop departments flourished.

The focus at these schools in general, then, was on immediate employment. Anna remembered that while her school had no college fairs, it did offer an employment fair for those looking for a job after high school. Laura was clear about the fact that learning a skill was pushed starting in middle school. She remembered representatives from the tech center constantly encouraging students to enroll. She was even expressly discouraged by those individuals from pursuing her goal of becoming a creative writer; they argued that becoming a technical writer would be more practical. Furthermore, five of the students said their schools had school-to-work programs that allowed students to start their shifts at full-time jobs during the last couple hours of school, and get school credit for it at the same time. Thus, the overall tendency of rural students to enter the workforce immediately following high school (as well as a possible gender gap in college entrance) could be reinforced by the rural high school's focus on work-related classes and programs for people seeking employment during and after high school.

Peer and Community Attitudes, Influences and Trends

The emphasis on acquiring a skill or attending a nearby institution was mirrored in the choices the interviewees saw their peers making after high school. A general trend, at least for the students who did want to go to college, was to pursue public schools in the region. Anna remembered, "Not very many people understood the concept of a private liberal arts college [...] If you're smart you go to [one particular university]; that's just, that's it. There's no other option." Caitlin estimated that about half of the students who went to college went to one particular nearby state school. Many of the

interviewees easily rattled off the few schools most of their classmates went to. Sara said that most of her classmates now attend the same college, and that they also joined the same fraternity. In each cases, many peers also went right into the workforce, and a few went into the military. Nearby tech schools were also a popular option. The eight students in the study were among a definite minority of students who went to liberal arts institutions. In five of their cases, they even left their home state to pursue higher education, which put them in an even smaller minority among their classmates.

Social scenes among peers at the students' eight high schools were very similar in some ways and dissimilar in others. All of the students asserted that everyone knew everyone else very well, and that they had gone to school together for many years (to slightly varying degrees). In one case, Lisa said that everyone was friends with everyone else. In Sara's case, cliques were very apparent, and the cool kids were easily distinguished from the un-cool kids. Reponses varied when students were asked whether they could think of ways in which academic achievement was encouraged or discouraged. Some could think of times when doing well in school was put down. Caitlin for example, said:

> Definitely I'd get teased for being a nerd or something like that, for concentrating too much on schoolwork and things like that, but for the most part if you did well people would support you in that. If you did poorly people generally didn't care. You wouldn't be teased or anything for doing bad in school.

Sara, whose school had obvious cliques, also felt there was some implicit discouragement of high aspirations. She observed:

> If you seem like your goals are so big, people are really uncomfortable with that for whatever reason. To be ideally cool, you'd probably be like a C+ to B- student, and be looking to go to a big university. That was the ideal. And of

> course, my friends and I, lots of my friends and I, weren't necessarily that. Oh, and you'd play a sport too, that was important.

Similarly, Laura remembered feeling slightly ostracized when the P-SAT scores came back and hers were higher than other students. Kyle, too, remembered being teased when he decided to take chemistry independently. None of the interviewees ever felt that students actively and militantly discouraged academic achievement, but they did feel that it made them different from their peers and in some cases made them feel ostracized.

While getting good grades was generally acceptable in many of these rural schools, other forms of educational achievement may not have been. A difference can be noted between getting good grades and actually pursuing an education and life outside of the community. Hannah observed:

> It was valued to get good grades just because that's what we were supposed to do. In terms of knowing things about the world and the outside world and wanting to get out and realizing that [the small town] is not the world, that was looked down upon. It was a big annoyance for me because I couldn't really talk about anything of substance with a lot of people. It just wasn't something that was cool.

Laura said, "It was discouraged to be really passionate about anything, no matter what it was." An intense focus on local happenings, and not on knowledge about the outside world, was evidenced in the way the students described their communities.

Other activities that did not involve the search for knowledge were explicitly encouraged. Many of the students brought up of their own accord the fact that sports were extremely important to the social scene at their schools in the eyes of both adults and students. Anna re membered that the superintendent of her school felt that the success of the football team's season was indicative of the success of the school year. A focus on sports may not be a uniquely rural feature of schools, but the size of these

schools may play an interesting role. Because the small size makes it easier for everyone to participate in sports, it may also become more expected that everyone do so. Anna observed, "If you weren't on a sports team and didn't have a good reason for it people kind of looked at you a little bit strangely." Caitlin remembered unsuccessfully trying to be athletic, and being saved in the social world only by the fact that she had been friends with the athletes from a young age and was therefore accepted by them. A connection between sports and the community can also be made: Lisa noted that sports and activities at the school made up half of the community's newspaper.

During the course of the interviews, it became clear that not only peer attitudes, but the attitudes of the community as well, may have influenced the choices of rural students after high school. Laura, for example, remembered hearing a community member discourage the valedictorian in her class from leaving the state to pursue higher education. Caitlin also observed a difference in the values of students at the liberal arts college and those in her rural community. She said:

> I just had a class today [in college] talking about how people look down on jobs like truck drivers. Where I'm from, that's a good job. People are much more proud of someone that became a construction worker or a truck driver than someone who's going to [an elite school].

According to Caitlin, no amount of prestige was attached to leaving the community and pursuing an elite education; on the contrary, staying in the community and getting a job was highly valued.

On a related note, a major feature of many of the interviews involved the social life of the community. One student, Sara, noticed a particular trend in her hometown that was also recognized by other interviewees. The town in which Sara attended high school

was the most isolated of the eight, and she eventually traveled the farthest to come to college. Her responses revealed the most pronounced sense of disconnection from her hometown as well. She described an interesting social scene in the high school and the community that factored into her decision to go far away from home. She explained the situation in this way:

> [The town] was pretty much controlled by power families whose kids got all the privileges you could imagine because of their last name. And those families, their kids, will stay in [the town] and raise their kids there. It's a great cycle. The families of my friends have pretty much almost all of them left [the town] since their kids graduated.
>
> You notice that when you're a kid in the schools. "I'm not an Anderson, I'm not a Johnson, obviously the teachers will not go out of their way to help me or to make me succeed." All the power families are also very conservative. I know of people who have been driven out because their politics definitely did not align with that of the power families.

The power families, though, were not necessarily those with the highest socioeconomic status. She estimated that they were mostly middle class, and that some of her friends who did not belong to that "privileged" group were closer to upper class. Very similarly, Natalie talked about the established families in her community who were unlikely to leave. She called the community a "name town" in which the longer your family had lived there, the more accepted you were. She went as far as to say, "Our school is very corrupt. The teachers would favor certain students, and it's just silly." When asked about what made a student popular at her school, Laura said, "It was a lot of how long your family had been there." Thus, a real incentive existed in the community for students

to stay and make a life there: as Natalie put it, "They're popular there, and the same people are staying, why leave?"

The Transition to College

Another major aspect of the interviews involved the students talking about the transition to college at a rigorous institution, and the ways in which they felt unprepared for certain aspects of higher education. All except for Kyle said they saw themselves as unprepared when they compared themselves to their peers at college. In many cases, the extent of preparedness seemed to be related to the amount of advanced classes or opportunities for independent study available at each rural school. Natalie, whose school had no advanced classes, remarked, "Especially my first year [of college] I felt really pissed off that I did not get the opportunities that other people did just because of where I live, and that's really upsetting." Students like Anna, who had the opportunity to take a few A.P. classes, felt less strongly about being disadvantaged in college. Thus, the curriculum of the high school showed a direct, tangible effect on these students: the lack of challenging classes negatively affected almost all of them as they began their college careers.

In general, all of the eight students noted that a lack of emphasis on the pursuit of higher education in their rural high schools continued to affect them as they entered college. For example, Lisa noted, "I also feel like the school is not structured towards sending kids to college. It's structured towards sending them to tech school or right out into the workforce. That was kind of hard for me." Besides the emotional difficulties and stress that came with un-preparedness, the students also explained that they came into college with fewer credits than students from larger high schools with more advanced

classes. As a result, they would have to register for classes later and had a smaller chance of graduating early. Some also claimed that they changed their minds about their majors after coming to college and realizing they were behind in the subject matter. Two students specifically explained that they had wanted to major in some sort of science, but that upon coming to college they realized they were not sufficiently prepared for the classes. Sara explained,

> Even now I still kind of feel that I'm behind. I entered the race 50 steps after everyone else did. And so, it's been really hard because a lot of times I feel like I'm just trying to play catch-up. People know these [advanced] things and have had experience with these things that I've never had.

Laura, the other student not from the immediate region, also said she feels like she has to spend her four years of college catching up. And Hannah said, "I was totally unprepared for the amount of work because I never did anything in high school and I got straight As and was valedictorian, which speaks to how easy everything was." Thus, even if the rural school experience did not keep these students from getting accepted into a selective institution, it did have a lasting effect in other ways.

Another useful way to gauge the effectiveness of rural high schools is by examining the success of the interviewees' rural peers who also decided to pursue college. One issue hinted at by a few of the students was the fact that some of them had heard about many of their rural peers dropping out of college. Anna noted that although it was not uncommon for students to go to college, "We've actually had a lot of people drop out, like within the first year." After Caitlin explained that most of her college-bound peers went to state schools, she added "And a lot of kids dropped out." Kyle, too, noted that many of his high school friends had dropped out of the community or state

colleges they attended. When asked why he thought this was the case, he replied: "I've actually talked to a couple of them and they just didn't feel like they were ready for it, actually." The drop-outs may also have included students who had the potential to do well in college. Laura talked about a friend who she viewed as extremely smart, but who ended up dropping out of college and getting a job. She reasoned, "[The school] caters to the needs of the majority, and the people who fall through the cracks, rather than the below average people, are the above average people. Many of them I have seen tumble." Because the interviewees had for the most part been independent and had actively sought a better education during high school, they fared better than those peers. However, the rural school curriculum did have an effect on the college preparedness of most of these students, and they could attest to the fact that the effect was felt by their peers at tech and state colleges as well.

"Worlds Away": The Disconnect Between Rural and College Life

In general, the students saw themselves as disconnected and different from their high school peers not only in their aspirations but in their values and politics. Lisa said, "My parents moved [from another town], and they were hippies, so I've always been different. Going against the norm is not unusual for me." Five of them also mentioned politics as a factor in the decision to leave the region and pursue involvement in a different type of community. Caitlin, whose hometown was relatively close to her college, noted, "My town was pretty conservative, and at the time I really wanted to be political and liberal and show everybody how wrong they were." Despite the technically short distance, she described her hometown as "worlds away" from college life. Sara was also passionate about her decision to go far away from home. She said, "Being in a small

town, it's really suffocating sometimes." The general tendency was summed up by Laura when she said, "I wanted to be around similar thinking people." Finding other people who did not discourage thinking about knowledge and the larger world was a luxury to these eight students, and a large part of their decision to leave home.

A general disconnect between rural life and higher education can also be attributed to a tendency within rural communities to disengage from the outside world. Hannah said, "You have a sense of isolation and security and disconnectedness with the rest of the world when you live in a rural area, and you don't really see it as an option to go far away because these places aren't connected and they're not familiar." She later elaborated, saying, "There aren't as many efforts to make the foreign familiar," and "People think that you're snotty for wanting to have left and for not being there still." Lisa agreed that people do not want to leave the community where generations of their family have lived for years. She said, "I think the community was the biggest influence on why people didn't go to college quite as much." Laura concluded: "It's a cycle. It's a very non-education based community, and environment, the school and the people in the village have a very small scope, worldview – just the little geographic area." This cycle Laura conceived of exists as a stabilizing mechanism; as the community looks inward, it encourages people to stay, and discourages new changes from coming in.

Finally, many of the students brought up the fact that there may also be a bias in selective, higher education institutions against people from rural backgrounds. The disconnect between rural life and higher education, then, could be mutually reinforced. Sara, Laura, Hannah, and Kyle were adamant about the fact that being rural was looked down upon at their liberal arts college. Kyle said, "People just don't think that anybody

from a rural place can possibly know anything other than how to farm, and maybe shoot things. I get that a lot, people just think that I don't know what I'm doing here. I think it's definitely looked down upon here." Sara, too, said, "I feel like rural is just such a bad thing to be, just generally, that's what people think about [being rural]." On the other hand, while Hannah perceived a negative attitude towards people from rural backgrounds, she said "there are few people who will actually be mean to you because of it." Laura saw it more as a general opinion of the people at the college that, "Only certain poor people are worth your attention. Rural people are just not important at all." In sum, this bias in higher education works with the inward, isolated nature of the rural community to reinforce a disconnect between the two, making the transition from one to the other difficult.

Conclusion

The responses of these eight students, when looked at together, show the interrelatedness of all the factors examined. To a large extent, the interviewees believed that their communities valued acquiring a skill and staying in the region. A majority of the students in these rural high schools did just that; if they did not immediately find a job after high school, they stayed within the region to pursue education at a tech or state school. The curricula and structure of the schools mirrored this norm by offering well-financed shop departments, guidance counselors with information on local schools, school-to-work programs, and few advanced courses. The students who did have high aspirations, then, were left to their own devices to put together a high school education that could compete with students from urban and suburban schools. And once they

achieved their goal of acceptance into a selective institution, they found themselves still lacking some of the skills needed for adequate college work.

A major theme throughout the interviews was the independence of each of the students. They took classes independently, and they made their decisions about college fairly independently of the school and even of their families in some cases. To varying degrees, they saw themselves as different from the people in their schools and communities. Their goals, values and in some cases politics, deviated from the norm. And once they reached the college classroom, they found themselves dealing with being different again; in this new context, they were different because they were rural. Their independence also says something about their peers and the general community: these students felt different for actively seeking knowledge because that search was something unexpected and abnormal within the community.

The information gathered from these eight students about their high schools can be applied to broader questions about the role of high schools and communities in the lives of individuals. Past research has shown that socioeconomics, the family, and the structure of the high school are important factors in determining whether a student goes to college or not. These interviews have shown how those factors pan out within close-knit, stable communities. Higher aspirations were not expected or encouraged, and the aspirations of the majority of students reflected that fact. Whether it was a particular college that everyone went to, a trade within the community, or the military, certain paths had been traveled many times before. Information was readily available to help students in making those decisions, and the community was behind those students every step of the way. While this served the needs of students with low aspirations, students with

loftier goals were left to their own devices as they attempted to obtain acceptance into selective, liberal arts institutions.

A general finding throughout the interviews was a perceived disconnect between rural high schools and higher education institutions. This disconnect, as well as the more accepted post-secondary paths, has been reinforced as generations of families stay within rural communities. Those with independent goals, or those outside of the "power families," have to take extra steps to find information that will help them achieve those goals. Communities shape schools to meet the needs of the majority, but this study shows how a minority of high-aspiring rural students are left at a disadvantage as they attempt to acquire a good education. At the same time, many of their peers are steered in the limited directions the community has established and approved, and receive their own disadvantages as a result. By alienating those high-achieving students, perhaps the communities maintain their internal stability. However, they also limit the opportunities of all of their high school students, whether those students have low aspirations or high goals. Instead of offering an opportunity for each student to reach his or her potential, then, the rural school largely becomes a vehicle for the maintenance of the community as it has been for generations.

This study showed how high-achieving students manage to make the transition to college at a liberal arts college, but the post-secondary lives of other rural students will need to be studied further. While these eight interviews hinted at the negative experiences of the interviewees' rural peers in college, a more direct inquiry into the nature of those experiences could give better insight into this problem. The tendencies of rural students after high school will need to be studied more in depth and compared

directly to those of urban and suburban students to further understand the limitations and advantages of each. It will also be beneficial to interview rural students who did not attend college, as well as those who attended technical college, state schools, or went into the military. In general, more can be done to understand how rural schools can become better equalizers by raising expectations and aspirations, and by offering more opportunities for all students to prepare for college.

Furthermore, the role of the higher education institution in this process needs to be closely analyzed. The students in this study felt that being rural was seen negatively in the college they now attend; to what extent is this true of higher education institutions in general? What more can colleges do to recruit and accommodate rural students? Recruitment efforts by liberal arts colleges worked well for some of the students in this study. Are students from other rural high schools being left out of this recruitment process? Higher education institutions will need to do more to reach out to students from all types of communities. As this study has shown, rural students with high aspirations could use the help and understanding of higher education institutions during the college search.

Finally, the culture of rural communities in general needs to be better understood, and should not be reduced to an examination of the lower socioeconomic status of rural residents. This study uncovered some of the values and tendencies of rural communities, and the ways in which the structure of rural high schools mirrored those values. Interviews with parents, community members, and administration at rural schools could give better insight into the general values and attitudes of the rural community. As rural communities change in the future and remain influential in the United States, more will

need to be done to understand how rural life is unique and how the lives of individuals in those contexts are shaped by the particularities of rural culture. Rural communities are isolated and often lack the resources of urban and suburban communities, but the disconnect between rural life and higher education is not inevitable and can be bridged. In this way, individuals from rural backgrounds will gain access to more opportunities, and begin to thrive in the pursuit of diverse paths.

Bibliography

Beeson, Elizabeth and Marty Strange. 2000. "Why Rural Matters: The Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 16: 63-140.

Beeson, Elizabeth and Marty Strange. 2003. "Why Rural Matters 2003: The Continuing Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 18: 3-16.

Carlsen, William S. and David H. Monk. 1992. "Differences Between Rural and Nonrural Secondary Science Teachers: Evidence from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 8: 1-10.

Coleman, James S. 1961. *The Adolescent Society*. New York: Free Press.

Coleman, Marilyn, Lawrence H. Ganong, Jacqueline Mary Clark and Richard Madsen. 1989. "Parentin g Perceptions in Rural and Urban Families: Is there a Difference?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51: 329-335.

D'Amico, Joseph J. and Vickie Nelson. 2000. "How on Earth Did You Hear About Us? A Study of Exemplary Rural School Practices in the Upper Midwest." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 16: 182-192.

Farkas, George, Christy Lleras and Steve Maczuga. Does Oppositional Culture Exist in Minority and Poverty Peer Groups? *American Sociological Review* 67: 148-155.

Gamoran, Adam. "The Stratification of High School Learning Opportunities." *Sociology of Education* 60: 135-155.

Goldhaber, Dan D. and Dominic J. Brewer. "Why Don't Schools and Teachers Seem to Matter?: Assessing the Impact of Unobservables on Educational Productivity." *The Journal of Human Resources* 32: 505-523.

Hallinan, Maureen T. and Richard A. Williams. 1990. Students' Characteristics and the Peer Influence Process. *Sociology of Education* 63: 122-132.

Hannaway, Jane and Joan E. Talbert. 1993. "Bringing Context into Effective Schools Research: Urban-Suburban Differences." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 29: 16-186.

Howley, Craig B. and Hobart L. Harmon, eds. 2000. Small High Schools that Flourish: Rural Context, Case Studies and Resources. Charleston, West Virginia: AEL, Inc.

Kannapel, Patricia J. and Alan J. DeYoung. 1999. "The Rural School Problem in 1999: A Review and Critique of the Literature." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 15: 67-79.

Klitgaard, Robert E. and George R. Hall. "Are There Unusually Effective Schools?" *The Journal of Human Resources* 10: 90-106.

Lareau, Annette. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lee, Valerie E. and Ruth B. Ekstrom. 1987. "Student Access to Guidance Counseling in High School." *American Educational Research Journal* 24: 287-310.

Lyson, Thomas A. 2002. "What Does a School Mean to a Community? Assessing the Social and Economic Benefits of Schools to Rural Villages in New York." Journal of Research in Rural Education 17: 131-137.

MacTavish, Katherine and Sonya Salamon. 2003. "What Do Rural Families Look Like Today?" Pp. 73-85 in *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by D. L. Brown and L.E. Swanson. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

McCracken, J. David and Jeff David T. Barcinas. 1991. "Differences Between Rural and Urban Schools, Student Characteristics, and Student Aspirations in Ohio." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 7: 29-40.

Ogbu, John U. and Signithia Fordham. 1986. "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the Burdens of 'Acting White'." *The Urban Review* 18: 176-206.

Rural School and Community Trust. 2004. "Beating the Odds: High Performing, Small High Schools in the Rural South."

Russell, Stephen and Glen H. Elder, Jr. "Academic Success in Rural America: Family Background and Community Integration." *Childhood* 4:169-181.

Young, Deidra L. 1998a. "Ambition, Self-Concept, and Achievement: A Structural Equation Model for Comparing Rural and Urban Students." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 14: 34-44.

Young, Deidra L. 1998b. "Rural and Urban Differences in Student Achievement in Science and Mathematics: A Multilevel Analysis." *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 9: 386-418.

*Note: All interviews were completed in the fall of 2006. Interviewees gave written consent for their responses to be used in this report and made available to the public.