

Preparing Rural Students for Large Colleges and Universities

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### Abstract

Results of this review of college student retention research suggest that students from rural communities face additional challenges adjusting to large colleges and universities compared to students from urban and suburban areas. Research that describes the additional challenges faced by rural students while transitioning to large institutions is presented. Implications are provided to assist rural school counselors in helping their students select colleges that meet their needs and prepare for their experiences at large colleges and universities.

### Preparing Rural Students for Large Colleges and Universities

As a counselor who worked with high school students in a very rural part of Upstate New York, I noticed a pattern that occurred among a select group of our college-bound students. Many of our best and brightest students, or those with high grade point averages, standardized test scores, and leadership experiences, were often steered away from attending local two and four-year colleges. Instead, these students were encouraged to consider larger (enrollments over 15,000), more prestigious universities that would provide them with more challenging learning environments and broader post-graduation opportunities.

While some students from this rural community excelled at large institutions, anecdotal evidence suggested that a sizable number of these students did not have successful experiences. In fact, many of these students dropped out of the large universities early in their first semesters, eventually enrolling in the local four-year college. Conversations with these students often revealed that they felt lost and out of place at large colleges. These experiences led me to question how I could have been more effective in helping these rural students select appropriate schools or in preparing them for their college transitions. Given that rural schools account for approximately 20% of all U.S. schools, with 10% considered “completely rural” (population < 2,500, not adjacent to metro area; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003), the same questions are likely being asked by numerous other rural school counselors who struggle with helping their students decide whether to attend large universities and how best to prepare students for transitions to these institutions.

While a review of school counseling literature failed to reveal an article on preparing rural students for college, a number of studies investigating the experiences of rural students at college have appeared in college student affairs literature. The purpose of this paper is to critically review this literature to assist rural school counselors in effectively preparing these students for their college transitions. I will begin by reviewing retention research to identify patterns in college persistence among students from rural communities, paying particular attention to the experiences of rural students who attend large universities. Next, I will review research that has uncovered potential challenges faced by students from rural communities who attend large universities. I will conclude by providing implications to assist rural school counselors in helping their students select colleges that meet their needs and in preparing them for their transitions to large universities.

### *Rural Students and College Retention*

The last comprehensive study of rural college student persistence using a national sample was conducted by Gibbs (1989), who compared the college attendance and persistence rates of 12,000 rural and urban students using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Gibbs concluded that although rural students were slightly less likely than urban students to attend college, those who did attend college tended to graduate at the same rates as urban students. However, significant urban/rural differences emerged when examining the types of colleges from which students graduated. Less than fifteen percent of rural students who completed their college degrees graduated from colleges listed in *Baron's Profiles of American Colleges* as "most," "highly," or "very" competitive compared to nearly thirty-four percent of urban

students. Gibbs also found that rural students were much more likely than urban students to graduate from colleges in rural areas. Fifty-three percent of rural students in the study attended college in a rural area, despite that fact that only twenty percent of all U.S. colleges are located in rural areas. By comparison, only fifteen percent of urban students graduated from a college in a rural area.

A second comprehensive study that examined the college persistence patterns of rural students was conducted by Schonert, Elliot, and Bills (1991), who tracked students from small, rural communities throughout the state of Iowa. The researchers obtained information about students' family backgrounds, high school experiences (including leadership experiences & grade point averages), and post-high school achievement through surveys, academic transcripts, and personal interviews. The researchers concluded that the rural youth in this study, overall, were satisfied with their pre-college preparation and that they actually went to college at higher rates than the national average. Additionally, those rural students who attended college persisted at rates higher than the national average.

Although the results suggest that rural Iowa students were as prepared, if not more prepared, for college than their urban and suburban peers, some interesting findings arose that provide potential implications for understanding rural students' experiences at college. For example, Schonert et al. (1991) concluded that rural students who left college tended to have held the highest leadership positions in high school. Additionally, the study found that students who did not persist tended to have the highest standardized test scores. Both high school leadership experience and standardized test scores are proven indicators of success at college (Astin, 1996); yet

these factors were negatively correlated with the academic success of rural students in this study. Another interesting finding from Schonert, et al. was that many of the rural students who dropped out eventually transferred and graduated from other institutions. The researchers concluded “much of the reported dropout behavior, especially that of 4-year non-persisters [as opposed to rural students dropping out of 2-year colleges] took more of the form of apparent educational mismatch than of actual exit from the educational system” (p. 283).

On one hand, the findings from Schonert et al. (1991) and Gibbs (1989) are encouraging because they indicate that rural students are as likely as urban and suburban students to attend and graduate from college. On the other hand, these results raise possible concerns regarding the support that rural students receive at college, especially at large colleges and universities. Schonert et al.’s findings that the best and brightest rural students (i.e., those with highest standardized test scores and leadership experience who attend 4-year colleges) often transferred before graduating suggests that these rural students did not find a good fit at their initial institutions. Unfortunately, Schonert et al. failed to report the size of the institutions at which rural students withdrew or completed their degrees. While one could speculate that the bright rural students in this study may have initially withdrawn from large colleges and universities and completed their degrees at smaller institutions, the data from this study alone do not provide sufficient evidence to warrant this conclusion. Similarly, while Gibb’s results clearly showed that rural students are more likely to graduate from colleges in rural areas, he neglected to report the size of the institutions that students attended.

However, a review of additional research that has investigated rural college student retention lends further support to the contention that rural students may experience additional difficulties at large colleges and universities. While several other retention studies have concluded that rural students, overall, are just as likely as urban and suburban students to graduate from college (Anderson, 1974; Downey, 1980; Feller, 1974), these studies, like the study conducted by Schonert et al. (1991), failed to specifically examine the retention rates of rural students who attended large universities. Perhaps not coincidentally, the three studies that collected data from rural students attending large universities found rural students at a higher risk of attrition than students from urban and suburban communities.

In a study of freshmen at a large, Midwest university, Cope (1972) found that students from rural communities tended to have higher attrition rates than students from urban communities. Cope concluded that his results “add support to the findings that students in a large university from the smaller high schools and smaller towns do not do as well academically as students from larger cities and secondary schools” (p. 95). He hypothesized that it was the degree of incongruence between the social and academic environment of students’ smaller high schools and that of their new college settings that determined how well they fit with the college.

The second study that examined the college retention rates of students from rural communities attending a large university was conducted with freshman at the University of Colorado by Aylesworth and Bloom (1976). The researchers found that the attrition rates for rural students were consistently higher than that of urban students. Like Schonert et al’s (1991) study conducted fifteen years later, the researchers found that

urban students who left the university did so to get away from higher education in general, while many rural students who left tended to transfer to other institutions. Aylesworth and Bloom concluded that many rural students did not find what they needed at the large university.

A third study that examined rural college student persistence using a single-institution sample was conducted by Peters (1990) at the University of Northern Colorado, an institution with over 10,000 students. Peters surveyed 462 freshmen at the University, half of whom reported coming from rural communities, and found that the freshman from rural home communities left the university at a statistically significant higher rate than the freshman from urban and suburban home communities. Further, Peters found that rural students were much more likely than urban and suburban students to cite inadequate positive relationships with faculty as a main reason for leaving. Peters concluded that rural students should be considered an at-risk group and should be connected with faculty advisors early on.

Another study that provided evidence regarding potential difficulties for rural students who attend large college and universities was conducted by Maples (2000). Using archival data from ACT, Inc., Maples examined the college environment satisfaction of college students from rural communities and concluded that students from rural communities were more satisfied with their academic environments at small colleges than at large colleges.

While research clearly shows that, overall, rural students are as likely as urban and suburban students to attend college and to graduate, research also indicates that rural students are less satisfied when attending large colleges and universities (Maples,

2000) and are more likely to graduate from colleges located in rural areas (Gibbs, 1989). Research also suggests that while urban students who leave college tend to exit higher education altogether, rural students who leave college tend to transfer and complete their degrees at other institutions that fit them better (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Schonert et al., 1991). These results, combined with the findings from Aylesworth and Bloom (1976), Cope (1972), and Peters (1990) indicating increased attrition rates for rural students at large institutions, suggest that rural students face additional challenges when transitioning to large colleges and universities.

### *Challenges Faced by Rural Students at Large Universities*

While recent research indicates that, in general, students from rural communities are as academically prepared as their urban peers (Zuckerbrod, 2007), research also suggests that rural students can face additional socio-cultural challenges compared to urban and suburban students when transitioning to large college and universities. Additional studies that have examined the experiences of rural students attending large colleges and universities provide useful information for preparing rural students effectively for their college experiences.

Not surprisingly, the literature indicates that one difficult transition for rural students who attend large universities relates to adjusting to the increased size of their classrooms and the campuses (Hemmings, Hill, & Ray, 1997; Maltzan, 2006; Parsons, 1992; Swift, 1988). On average, rural schools are much smaller and have lower student-teacher ratios than urban and suburban schools (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; McIntire, Marion, & Quaglia, 1990). Rural students may experience more difficulty than their urban peers in adjusting to larger, lecture style classrooms and teachers who may

not know their names or make personal contact with them (Maltzan, 2006). The size of the campus can also be intimidating to students who are unaccustomed to navigating large buildings and busy streets and sidewalks. Moreover, fears about experiencing urban problems, such as crime and homeless people, can prevent rural students from ever exploring or experiencing the surrounding community if they attend a large campus in an urban environment (Parsons, 1992).

Rural students may also experience difficulty transitioning from their racially and culturally homogenous home environments (McIntire, Marion, & Quaglia, 1990; Pearson & Sutton, 1999) to the more ethnically and culturally diverse environments that are characteristic of larger universities. Parsons (1992), in a study of rural students who attended the University of California (UC) at Berkeley, found that rural students who left the university described being overwhelmed by the enormous racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity they experienced. Rather than being stimulated by these new and diverse experiences, several students cited their discomfort with diverse students and faculty at the institution as evidence that they did not fit in or belong at a large university.

Large colleges and universities also provide different forms of extra-curricular activities than small, rural high schools, which may help to explain Schonert et al.'s (1991) finding regarding a negative correlation between persistence and leadership experiences in high school. While rural schools tend to provide fewer extra-curricular activities than large, metropolitan high schools (Schonert et al., 1991), the small number of participants in each activity typically offers students more opportunities for active participation and leadership roles than students in urban high schools (Downey, 1980). Large colleges, while providing rural students with a much wider range of social and

extra-curricular activities, offer fewer opportunities for leadership roles and may require more passive forms of participation, especially during students' initial transitions to college (Downey, 1980). Additionally, Swift (1988) has noted that while large colleges in urban areas tend to offer more forms of cultural activities than smaller colleges in more rural areas, including plays, musicals, museums, etc., there are fewer opportunities at large colleges in urban settings for outdoor activities, which may be an important limitation to students from rural communities.

An additional challenge faced by rural students who attend large universities relates to the drastic increase in curricular offerings at large universities (Maltzan, 2006). Smaller high schools tend to offer students a more limited selection of courses than larger high schools, which can limit rural students' involvement in designing their programs of study. Additionally, the lack of exposure to professional and technical careers in rural areas (Gibbs, 1989) not only can reduce student occupational aspirations (Apostal & Bilden, 1991; Hu, 2003), but can also overwhelm students and make them feel as if they are under-prepared compared to their urban and suburban peers (Maltzan, 2006). Exposure to the plethora of course offerings, academic majors, and occupations available to them at large universities can also lead rural students to frequent changes in occupational interests and college majors (Downey, 1980), which can contribute to college attrition (Gillespie & Noble, 1992).

Broad cultural differences between rural and urban life may add an additional burden to rural students who are transitioning to large institutions, especially those located in metropolitan settings. Swift (1988) found that the stress that occurs during transitions to college can be "exacerbated for person's who must simultaneously make

the transition from rural to urban environments” (p. 1). According to Swift (1988), rural environments tend to be more relaxed, friendly, and collectivist in nature; whereas urban environments tend to be more hurried, less friendly, and more competitive. Additionally, social relationships in rural communities tend to be more personal and tightly-knit than urban social relationships (McIntire, Marion, & Quaglia, 1990). Language patterns and personal mannerisms also tend to differ between rural and urban communities, which can add stress to rural students as they attempt to transition to urban universities (Swift, 1988). Challenges associated with navigating the differences between rural and urban cultures, especially at larger colleges, can make rural students feel out of place and can lead to frequent trips home to socialize with other “country kids” with whom they are comfortable (Maltzan, 2006, p. 179).

These challenges faced by rural students when transitioning to large colleges and universities can not only increase their attrition rates, but can also contribute to additional mental health problems. McLaughlin (1970) found that a disproportionate number of college students from rural communities exhibited depressive reactions to their experiences at college. Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) found that rural college students tended to have more mental health problems than students from more urban backgrounds, which included increased feelings of loneliness and excessive use of alcohol and other drugs. Similarly, Wilbourn (1987), using survey data collected from 753 students attending Texas A&M University, found that students from rural communities experienced more stress related to feeling different from other students and feeling uncomfortable in the large campus environment. Wilbourn also found that rural students were less likely than urban students to access counseling services at

college and that those rural students who did use counseling services tended to go for academic counseling as opposed to mental health or career counseling. These findings suggest the need for rural school counselors to prepare their students effectively for the additional challenges they may experience if they chose to attend large universities.

### *Effectively Preparing Rural Students for Large Universities*

Rural school counselors can begin the process of effectively preparing rural students for their transitions to large universities by helping students explore their reasons for choosing to attend a large institution. Research indicates that for the most successful rural students, choosing to attend a local college can feel like a failure on their part to expand themselves and become more economically and socially privileged (Howely, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996). Many successful rural students may feel pressured to “go away” to college, either internally or externally from parents, friends, or influential teachers, even though they may be more comfortable attending the smaller, local college. Therefore, it is important for school counselors to help students sort through the various influences on their decisions to apply to large institutions and to help them explore other motivations, beyond prestige and pressure, for choosing to attend a large university. School counselors should take the time to thoroughly assess other reasons students have chosen to apply, including academic reasons (i.e., the right major, course offerings, strength of academic programs), and social reasons (i.e., appealing extra-curricular activities, other friends attending, etc.) and to help students weigh these reasons against the potential challenges they will face in transitioning to these institutions.

In addition to helping rural students thoroughly assess the potential fit for them at large colleges, rural school counselors can also be instrumental in helping prepare rural students who decide to attend large colleges and universities. As the literature suggests, rural students often become overwhelmed by the size of the campus and, if attending a university in an urban setting, the surrounding community as well. School counselors can assist in this transition by encouraging students to make visits to the campus to become familiar with the surroundings. While student orientation programs provide an excellent way for new college students to become acquainted with the campus and to meet other incoming freshman, these experiences generally do not assist students in their decision processes because they take place in the summer, after students have already decided to attend. Additionally, summer orientation programs fail to give students a true taste of the college environment because they do not occur during the academic year. What seems like a friendly, intimate campus during summer orientation can quickly become overwhelming to students when the fall semester begins and the full student body, faculty, and staff resume their activities. School counselors can help students get a feel for whether or not they “fit” at the university by encouraging them to visit during the academic year, before they decide to attend. Providing students with lists of “must sees” during their visits, which should include viewing classrooms, dormitories, dining halls, athletic facilities, and campus libraries, will provide incentive for students to explore these important campus resources in order to become acquainted with them and to get a true sense of whether they feel they fit at the college.

The results of this literature review also indicate that rural students can become overwhelmed by the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity inherent in many large

universities. However, results from Parson's (1992) study indicate while many rural students who left UC Berkeley described being uncomfortable with diversity, students who persisted reported embracing diversity. School counselors can help students embrace diversity by providing opportunities for cultural exchanges with urban students throughout their high school experiences. Rural school counselors can also assist rural students by providing regular workshops that focus on various aspects of diversity and field trips that expose rural students to cultures outside of those of their rural communities.

Results of Parson's (1992) qualitative study also indicated that rural students who left college tended to isolate themselves and not become involved in the campus. Conversely, successful rural students described themselves as "joiners" (Parson, 1992, p.39), meaning they sought to become involved in numerous extra-curricular activities, including intramural sports, clubs, and Greek organizations. Rural school counselors can facilitate student "joining" at college by encouraging their students to explore the plethora of opportunities for extra-curricular involvement available to them at large colleges and universities before they actually arrive and by challenging them to participate in activities they find appealing. This process will also allow rural students to identify, ahead of time, the different types of extracurricular activities that might be available to them, especially those who attend large, urban universities, which are likely to provide more cultural activities and fewer outdoor activities than were available at rural high schools.

Retention research also indicates that, depending upon the size and nature of the organization students chose to join, there may be fewer opportunities for active

participation and leadership roles in large colleges and universities than students from rural communities may have been accustomed to in their small high schools (Downey, 1980). For example, while a rural student may find it exciting to have numerous drama clubs available to her at college, she may become discouraged to learn that obtaining prominent roles in productions is more competitive than it was in her high school. Rural school counselors can assist in preparing their rural students for transitions to large colleges and universities by helping students understand the more passive forms of involvement that might be necessary during their initial college transitions.

While becoming involved in campus is certainly central to rural college student persistence, research also indicates that successful college students from rural communities maintained strong connections to members of their home communities as well. According to Maltzan (2006), whereas unsuccessful students tended to come home every weekend to attend sporting and social events, successful rural students split their weekends between home and college. Similar to research that has examined the experiences of successful underrepresented minority college students (Guiffrida, 2004; 2005), striking a balance between home and college allowed rural students to become integrated into the social and academic realms of college while maintaining supportive relationships at home. Rural school counselors, therefore, should prepare rural students and their families regarding the need to become immersed in college academic and social life without abandoning supportive relationships with family members and friends from home.

Preparing rural students for the plethora of courses and academic majors available at large universities is another way in which rural school counselors can assist

their students in their transitions to large universities. This process begins with comprehensive career guidance, which includes exposing students to as many occupations as possible throughout their high school experiences, especially careers that fall outside of the ones students are typically exposed to in rural communities. Extensive pre-college career exposure and exploration will help prevent rural students from becoming easily overwhelmed by the expanded choices available to them at large colleges and universities.

Another substantial problem for rural students who attend large universities is that they tend not to seek out help from the university when they experience difficulties (Parsons, 1992), which is particularly troubling considering the additional challenges these students often face when transitioning to large colleges and universities.

According to Saba (1991), some rural students may fail to seek outside help at college because of a mistrust of outsiders, particularly urbanites. It may also be countercultural for rural students to share their problems with people outside their close-knit support network from home. Moreover, rural students may fail to seek help at large colleges because they may not know how to access the support services available to them. In rural high schools, the school counselor tends to be a generalist who handles a wide range of academic and personal issues for students (Pearson & Sutton, 1999).

However, in large colleges and universities, support services tend to be decentralized, which can pose a challenge for students who are accustomed to more centralized support services.

Rural school counselors who understand the additional challenges faced by rural students who attend large colleges and universities can prepare their students for

success by encouraging them to take advantage of counseling, advising, and other related support services available at college. Additionally, rural school counselors can teach students which office or support person is available to help them with particular problems, questions, or concerns before they attend to ensure they seek the proper channels for assistance. Students may not know, for example, that their residence hall advisors can not only assist in providing information about campus resources, such as finding activities to join or navigating the campus, but that they are also trained in paraprofessional counseling skills in order to assist their residents with relatively innocuous personal and interpersonal problems. Students should also be aware, before they arrive, that (a) faculty and academic advisors are available at college to help students with course selection and degree program planning; (b) counselors located in career services centers offer assistance in career exploration, planning, and job placement; and (c) mental health counselors located in college counseling centers are available to assist students with personal and interpersonal problems. Helping students understand the broad web of support available to them may encourage them to seek out assistance when they need it.

Finally, one of the most important steps toward preparing rural students for their transitions to large colleges and universities is to teach them to be flexible, adaptive, and open to new experiences that promote change and growth while at college. According to Parsons (1992), the most significant theme among rural students who did not persist at UC Berkeley was that they reported not changing their behaviors at all when it came to adapting to the large university. These unsuccessful students tended to feel it was the university's responsibility rather than their own to assist them and to

facilitate their integration. Similarly, unsuccessful students in Maltzan's (2006) study also indicated a fear of "changing" while at college (p. 180), especially with regard to their moral values. Successful rural students, however, reported being open to change and, in the case of Parson's study, working hard to adapt to their environments in order to succeed at the large institution.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

The research reviewed in this paper provides rural school counselors with insight into the experiences of rural students who attend large colleges and universities. The literature suggests that rural students may have a more difficult time than urban and suburban students adjusting to the increased size of the campus and surrounding community; becoming comfortable with racial/ethnic diversity; becoming accustomed to expanded social, academic, and career options; adapting to broad cultural differences between urban and rural cultures; and accessing student support services. These challenges are likely to have contributed to the high rates of mental health problems experienced by rural college students, low college persistence rates at large institutions, and high rates of transfer. Results of this literature review indicate that rural school counselors can assist in helping their students select the right colleges by discussing these potential challenges with students and helping them weigh these challenges against their reasons for choosing to apply or attend a large university.

Rural school counselors can also take a number of steps to help prepare their students who decide to attend large colleges and universities. Rural school counselors can begin by encouraging their students to become acquainted with the campus before they attend and to help them become comfortable with racial and ethnic diversity

throughout their high school experiences. Rural school counselors can also assist students in their college transition by encouraging them to join extracurricular activities and to be prepared for more passive forms of involvement than they may be accustomed to in their rural high schools. Additionally, exposing students to a plethora of occupations beyond those typical of their home environments will help reduce the risk of students becoming overwhelmed by the extensive choices available to them at large colleges and universities. Finally, rural school counselors should prepare students by encouraging them to adapt to their surroundings and to seek help from student support services, including counseling and advising services, as needed.

While counselors who take these steps will likely help rural students reduce the chances of choosing the wrong college or failing at large colleges and universities, further research is needed to understand the experiences of successful and unsuccessful rural students at all types of colleges. The addition of more in-depth qualitative data that examines the conditions under which some rural students succeed at large college and universities while others do not is key to establishing models to help school counselors better understand students' college needs. Moreover, research that examines the experiences of rural youth from different areas of the country would prove valuable in comparing college persistence patterns and the needs of students from various regions of the country.

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