Supporting and Retaining Students from Rural Home Communities at Large Colleges and Universities

Douglas A. Guiffrida

University of Rochester
Abstract

Results of this review of higher education research suggest that students from rural home communities face additional challenges compared to urban and suburban students when transitioning to large colleges and universities. Research that describes these additional challenges is presented along with implications for student support and retention professionals at large colleges and universities to effectively support and retain their rural students.
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With increased costs of higher education and an expected decrease in the traditional-aged college freshman pool, college retention is becoming an increasingly important issue to student affairs professionals across the country (Tinto, 1993). Students identified as part of a special population are of particular interest to student support and retention researchers and practitioners because their experiences may differ from those of other students (Schonert, Elliot & Bills, 1991). One often-overlooked population of students appropriate for increased attention is students from small towns and rural communities.

One important reason for considering the issues of rural students is that, like other special populations of college students, rural students bring unique needs and challenges when entering college. Although there are many high quality rural schools, researchers have identified several aspects of rural life that may hinder the success of rural students in post-secondary education. Because rural schools tend to be smaller than urban and suburban schools, rural students have a more limited selection of classes, including fewer college preparatory classes than urban students (Gibbs, 1989; Schonert, et al, 1991). Additionally, rural areas tend to be poorer than urban areas. In fact, the farther away one is from a metropolitan area, the more likely he/she will be poor (National Network of Regional Educational Laboratories, 1999). As a result of living in poorer areas, these students tend to be exposed to fewer professional/technical careers (Gibbs, 1989), which can reduce their occupational aspirations (Apostal & Bilden, 1991; Hu, 2003). Additionally, compared to urban and suburban schools in the same state, rural schools tend to provide students with less access to technology and to pay teachers and administrators less
A second reason that student affairs professionals should consider the issues of rural students is because rural students constitute a sizable percentage of U.S. college students. Depending on the definition of rural, the percentage of rural students in the U.S. can account for as many as 27% of school aged children (La Turno Hines, 2002), nearly half of whom go on to college (Gibbs, 1989). Even by the most conservative definitions of “rural”, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2003) reports 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).

Despite the well-documented limitations inherent in many rural schools and communities and the large percentage of rural students who attend U.S. colleges and universities, articles examining the issues of rural students have appeared only sparingly in college retention literature. Moreover, a review of higher education literature failed to reveal a comprehensive review of this line of research. The purpose of this paper is to critically review research that has examined the experiences of rural college students to identify (a) patterns in their college persistence; (b) potential challenges faced by rural students in higher education, including challenges that may be exacerbated at large colleges and universities; and (c) strategies to assist practitioners in supporting and retaining students from rural communities.

Rural Students and College Retention

Only a few studies have investigated the college retention rates of students from rural communities. The last comprehensive study of rural college student persistence conducted with a national sample was performed more than 15 years ago. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Gibbs (1989) compared the college attendance and persistence
rates of 12,000 rural and urban students. 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, et al. (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 these studies alone do not provide sufficient evidence to fully 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. While rural colleges tend to be smaller than urban colleges, this is certainly not always the case and, therefore, it is impossible to draw firm conclusions regarding relationships between rural student success and size of the institution from this finding.

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, it was the two studies that collected data from rural students attending large universities that 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.

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 rural colleges, which tend to be smaller (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) and Cope (1972) indicating increased attrition rates for rural students at large institutions, suggests that rural students have faced additional challenges when transitioning to large colleges and universities.

Challenges Faced by Rural Students at Large Colleges and Universities
As indicated earlier, rural school districts face a number of challenges compared to many urban and suburban districts, which can include paying teachers and administrators less (Beeson & Strange, 2003), offering fewer college preparatory classes (Gibbs, 1989; Schonert et al., 1991) and less instructional technology (Beeson & Strange, 2003; LaTurno Hines, 2002), and having fewer opportunities to expose students to college occupations (Apostle & Bilden, 1991; Gibbs, 1989; Hu, 2003). These limitations inherent in many rural schools can cause additional challenges for students from rural home communities when transitioning to higher education. Additional studies that have examined the experiences of rural students suggest the challenges that rural students face when transitioning to college can be exacerbated when attending large colleges and universities.

Not surprisingly, the literature indicated that one difficult transition for rural students who attend large colleges and universities relates to adjusting to the increased size of their classrooms and the campuses (Hemmings, Hill, & Ray, 1997; Parsons, 1992; Swift, 1988; Wilbourn, 1987). 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). Therefore, 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. 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 Berkley, 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 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. Smaller high schools tend to offer students a more limited selection of courses than larger high schools (Anderson, 1974). This may limit rural students’ involvement in designing their programs of study, a skill crucial to surviving at a large college. It may also provide students less opportunity to explore new academic and occupational areas than students from larger, urban high schools. Exposure to the plethora of course offerings, academic majors, and occupations available to them at large universities could lead rural students to frequent changes in occupational interests and college majors (Downey, 1980), which can contribute to college attrition (Gillespie & Noble, 1992).

Finally, 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 and collectivist in nature; whereas urban environments tend to be more hurried and 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). Adapting to these broad cultural differences may hinder the abilities of rural students to successfully adapt to their urban college environment.

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 and 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 provide powerful evidence to suggest that rural students could benefit from additional student support and retention services at large colleges and universities.

**Effectively Supporting and Retaining Rural Students at Large Colleges and Universities**

The myriad of challenges faced by rural students who attend large colleges and universities indicates that comprehensive student support services are needed to retain these students. Given the importance of student/institutional fit to college students success (Tinto, 1993), it is clear that this retention process needs to begin before students arrive on campus. Student support professionals at large colleges and universities who are seeking to improve the retention rates of rural students should encourage their colleges’ admissions staff to work collaboratively with rural school counselors and teachers to help rural 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 college
admissions counselors to encourage rural students to seek help in sorting through the various
influences to 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. College
personnel at large colleges and universities should encourage rural school counselors to take the
time to thoroughly assess other reasons students have chosen to apply, including academic (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
to be sure they have found a good fit.

As the literature suggests, rural students can become overwhelmed by the size of the
campus and, if attending a university in an urban setting, the surrounding community as well.
College admissions counselors and academic advisors can assist in this transition by encouraging
students to make visits to the campus to become familiar with the surroundings before they begin
their studies. 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. Admissions counselors can help rural 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 tours of classrooms, dormitories, dining halls, athletic facilities, and campus libraries, while school is in session, will allow rural students to become acquainted with these facilities while, at the same time, getting a feel for whether they fit with the culture of the institution.

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 indicated while many rural students who left UC Berkley described being uncomfortable with diversity, students who persisted reported embracing diversity. Student support and retention professionals can help rural students embrace diversity by providing diversity workshops and opportunities for rural students to collaborate with students from diverse cultures early in their college experiences. In fact, offering diversity workshops as components of summer orientation programs or freshman seminars would likely prepare incoming students of all ethnic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds for their diverse encounters at college.

Results of Parson’s (1992) study also indicated that rural students who left UC Berkley tended to isolate themselves and not become involved in the campus. Conversely, successful rural students described themselves as “joiners” (p.39), meaning they sought to become involved in numerous extra-curricular activities, including intramural sports, clubs, and Greek organizations. College faculty and staff 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 and by challenging them to actively participate in activities they find appealing.

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 rural students may find it exciting to have numerous drama clubs available to them at college, they may become discouraged to learn that obtaining prominent roles in the productions is more competitive than it was in their high schools. Faculty and Staff at large colleges and universities can support rural students by helping them understand the more passive forms of involvement that might be necessary during their initial college transitions.

Assisting rural students with the plethora of courses and academic majors available at large universities is another way in which college faculty and staff can assist students in their transitions to large universities. Academic counselors and faculty advisors should not assume that their rural students will be as prepared as students from larger high schools in selecting courses and completing programs of study and, therefore, should offer additional support to these students.

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; Wilbourn, 1987), 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.

College student affairs professionals who understand the additional challenges faced by rural students who attend large colleges and universities can support their students by encouraging them to take advantage of counseling, advising, and other related support services available at college. Additionally, college orientation programs should carefully explain to students which office or support person is available to help them with particular problems 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 they are also often trained in paraprofessional counseling skills to assist their residents with relatively innocuous personal and interpersonal problems. Students should also be aware 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 in supporting rural students during 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 Berkley 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. Successful rural students in Parson’s study, however, reported 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 student support and retention professionals from large colleges and universities with insight into the experiences of rural students who attend their institutions. 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. By recognizing the challenges experienced by rural students, student affairs professionals at large colleges and universities will be more likely to develop comprehensive programs to support and retain these students.

While the research reviewed in this paper provides a foundation for recognizing the
unique needs and challenges of rural students who attend large colleges and universities, additional research is needed to advance the ability of student affairs professionals to support and retain these students. Several of the most comprehensive studies that have investigated this issue are decades old and new research is needed to establish the saliency of these issues with current rural students. Additionally, more in-depth qualitative research that examines the conditions under which some rural students succeed at large colleges and universities while others do not will allow for more comprehensive support and retention programs tailored to meet the unique needs of each rural student. 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.
References


