
Abstract:
One-third of America’s youth attend schools in rural areas (Provasnick et al., 2007). Although the educational aspirations of rural youth have steadily increased in the past 30 years, denoted by a significant increase in postsecondary education (Snyder & Dillow, 2011), few studies have examined how these youth prepare for the transition to postsecondary education (PSE). Prior research indicates that students from rural communities and high schools face unique challenges due to the level of rigor of their academic preparation, geographic isolation, and socioeconomic conditions (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Meece et al., 2013). These challenges have the potential to hinder or deter rural students from entering four-year universities. This proposal reports findings from a larger research study that examines the perspectives and experiences of high-achieving rural students preparing for the transition to PSE.

We used qualitative methods grounded in Coleman’s (1988) social capital framework to examine students’ perceptions of the resources and opportunities afforded to them during the transition into PSE. Twenty-nine students participated, all high achievers with an average high school GPA of 3.67. Ten participants were from rural high schools. We determined rurality using NCES urban-centric locale coding (rural, suburban, town, and city). The total sample was racially and ethnically diverse, including 11 students who identified as African American, 4 as Latina/o, 4 as White/Caucasian, 3 as American Indian, 3 as Asian American, 2 as multiracial, and 2 as other or not reported. All students were from public high schools in a southeastern U.S. state.

We conducted focus group interviews and analyses through a phenomenological lens (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Students were assigned to a focus group based on their high school’s NCES code.

Looking specifically at the students from rural high schools, students reported heightened anxieties and fears regarding admission to and success in a four-year institution. These perceived barriers stem from limits of the type and amount of social capital available to students due to constraints in home, community, and school resources. Despite high levels of academic achievement in this sample, students reported that their biggest worries about college were “dropping out,” “not getting in,” “failing,” and “not passing classes” due to their academic abilities. They attributed these challenges to the lack of proper preparation for college by their schools, and limited information provided by their family, peer, and other-adult networks. Similar sentiments were expressed regarding their abilities to integrate socially as well.

Based on these findings, we conclude that students from rural high schools are at high risk for experiencing certain psychological barriers that can deter them from pursuing and accessing college. These barriers are based on the students’ perception of their environmental context. Given that rurality presents unique challenges for students, more research is needed to examine the psychological barriers that may hinder rural youth’s enrollment and completion of postsecondary education, as well as the forms of resilience that are effective in allowing students to negotiate the academic and social
rigors of the college environment. This proposal provides initial, emerging insights regarding this matter.