

Breaking the “Golden Cage”:
*Increasing College Access for Low-Income High-Achieving Rural Students Through the
Selective College Admissions Process*

Franklin Eccher

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Advisors: Richard Hersh and Jeremiah Quinlan
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Abstract

The “undermatch” problem in higher education—that America’s best students do not necessarily attend America’s best colleges and universities—has grown to drive conversations about college access. Inspired by Caroline Hoxby’s research on income-based college application disparities, more colleges are expanding the scope of their recruitment efforts to include previously untapped low-income high-achievers. Yet low-income high-achieving rural students, who remain isolated from college-going resources found in metropolitan areas, are more likely than their suburban or urban counterparts to undermatch. Through interviews with selective college admissions officers and partner organizations, this capstone investigates the efforts underway in the selective higher education admissions network to prioritize rural students through recruitment, evaluation, and matriculation. I recommend that selective colleges can increase access for low-income high-achieving rural students by expanding recruitment outreach to include rural parts of the country, establishing an institutional priority for qualified rural students, and providing rural-specific programming throughout the admissions process.

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Introduction

America's best colleges and universities have an "undermatch" problem: the best students do not always apply to the best schools. In fact, more than half of America's most talented low-income students never apply to any competitive colleges.¹ This startling reality has triggered a new movement among college admissions offices and partner organizations to "find" these missing "one-offs." Yet, because the majority of these students concentrate in the same metropolitan areas, college access initiatives often miss low-income high-achieving rural students. Rural students attend and graduate college at rates lower than their urban or suburban peers and are more likely to undermatch at the college they choose.² While rural and small town students have become an explicit access goal of some selective colleges and access partners, many selective colleges have yet to implement practical strategies for recruiting, accepting, and matriculating these students.

These solutions are necessary because, for all low-income high-achieving students, the transition between secondary education and post-secondary education can be daunting. But for a rural student of a similar socioeconomic background, who must traverse the physical and sociocultural distance between their rural community and a post-secondary institution, that gap can appear impassable. My own attendance at Yale College coming from a rural community was a product of chance and the resources invested in me to make Yale a reality: an experience at a Stanford pre-collegiate summer camp (for which I received partial financial aid) and an all-expense-paid visit to Yale's admitted students program.

¹ Caroline Hoxby, and Christopher Avery. "The Missing 'One-Offs': The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students." *National Bureau of Economic Research*, December 2012.

² Byun, Soo-yong, Judith L. Meece, and Matthew J. Irvin. "Rural-Nonrural Disparities in Postsecondary Educational Attainment Revisited." *American Educational Research Journal* 49, no. 3 (June 2012): 412–37.; Hoxby and Avery, "The Missing 'One-Offs.'"

While often overlooked in the literature on college access, rural students compose a significant portion of America's K-12 students. 28.5% of American schools are rural, serving 14.7% of American students. Nearly half (48.2%) of rural students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and more than a quarter (25.2%) of rural students are rural minority students. In thirteen states, more than half of all public schools are rural (like Montana, where 74% of schools are rural).³ Furthermore, rural students score on par with their suburban peers and better than their urban peers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) up until their senior year of high school, and rural high schools average an 87.3% graduation rate.⁴

Since the 2016 election, a new narrative has developed in American higher education media: the idea that selective colleges have begun to “discover” rural America.⁵ This narrative is supported by a 2017 *Inside Higher Ed* survey, in which college admissions directors purported to be recruiting rural students as a unique demographic of interest.⁶ With Donald Trump's popularity in the rural Rust Belt in the 2016 election, some saw the results of the *Inside Higher Ed* survey as an indication of a movement to combat a “political disconnect” in American higher education between rural and non-rural areas of the country.⁷ The extent of the geographic disconnect in college attainment is striking: while rural high school graduation rates are at or above that of suburban or urban high schools, college enrollment rates in the first semester after

³ These states include Montana, South Dakota, Vermont, North Dakota, Maine, Alaska, Nebraska, Wyoming, Oklahoma, Mississippi, West Virginia, New Hampshire, and Iowa.

⁴ Showalter, Daniel, Robert Klein, Jerry Johnson, and Sara Hartman. “Why Rural Matters 2015-2016: Understanding the Changing Landscape.” Rural School and Community Trust, June 2017. 14. Despite this encouraging achievement numbers overall, NAEP scores do lag in the American South (specifically Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama), as well as New Mexico and Hawaii.

⁵ “The New Holy Grail in Recruitment: Rural Students.” EAB, February 1, 2017.; Belkin, Douglas. “For Colleges, A Rural Reckoning.” *Wall Street Journal*, December 1, 2017, sec. Life.

⁶ Jaschik, Scott. “The 2017 Survey of Admissions Directors: Pressure All Around.” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 13, 2017.

⁷ Anderson, Nick. “The Trump Effect in College Admissions: Rural Outreach Increases, International Recruitment Gets Harder.” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2017.

high school for rural students are 3% and 8% lower than their urban and suburban counterparts, respectively.⁸ Only 29.3% of all rural adults age 18-24 are enrolled in any college program, compared to 47.7% of urban students of the same age group.⁹ Further, low-income high-achieving rural students are more likely than any other college-bound students to choose a college of a selectivity lower than the competitiveness of their application.¹⁰

This is the nature of the “undermatch” problem more broadly: low-income high-achieving students are more likely to apply to and enroll at the same schools as lower achieving peers at their same income level, rather than higher achieving peers of a higher income level.¹¹ Most low-income students with the qualifications to be competitive in a selective college’s admissions pool do not ever apply to any selective college—or, if they do apply, are admitted but choose not to matriculate.

New scholarship has begun to explore what exacerbates undermatch in rural parts of the country. Some ideas center around rural *habitus*: the idea that rural schools are cornerstones of rural communities, but that those communities can hinder students’ desires to pursue post-secondary education outside of their immediate geographic vicinity. *Habitus* limits the geographic range of a student’s college aspirations,¹² and discourages a student’s matriculation at a selective school because of the conflicting sociocultural values inherent in rural life.¹³

⁸ Callow, Bryan. “Rural Students Underrepresented in Higher Education.” *Higher Education Publication* (blog). Accessed November 23, 2018.

⁹ “Table B.3.b.-1 Percentage of Persons Ages 18-29 Enrolled in Colleges or Universities, by Age Group, 4-Category Local, and Sex.” NCES 2015.

¹⁰ Hoxby and Avery, “The Missing One-Offs.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Turley, Ruth N. López. “College Proximity: Mapping Access to Opportunity.” *Sociology of Education* 82, no. 2 (April 2009): 126–46.

¹³ Wilcox, Kristen Campbell, Janet I Angelis, Linda Baker, and Hal A Lawson. “The Value of People, Place and Possibilities: A Multiple Case Study of Rural High School Completion.” *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 29, no. 9 (2014): 1–18.

McDonough et al. term this phenomenon “The Golden Cage.”¹⁴ Compounding this problem are information gaps on all fronts: how to look for colleges, how and when to take standardized tests, how to report financial aid information accurately, among others. Within selective colleges themselves, admissions officers do not usually include rural areas in the scope of their recruitment travel because high-achieving students from underrepresented backgrounds concentrate more highly in the same few metropolitan areas.¹⁵

Low-income rural and low-income urban students share many of the same barriers to college access. Yet, while talented low-income urban students are often the focus of community-based organizations (CBOs), national organizations, and post-secondary institutions, the geographic isolation of rural students with the qualifications to go to a selective school makes it difficult both for the selective school to make contact and for the student to feel confident enough to apply and matriculate. For urban students in the New York City area, for example, the Coalition for College Access lists twenty-four partner CBOs. For rural students in places like Idaho or Colorado, most of the college-going resources available are state-based, often with the intent to send students to less selective local or state institutions. One rural CBO, like Palouse Pathways in rural Idaho or the Chang Chavkin Scholars in rural Colorado, for example,¹⁶ may service an entire state or region, and likely won’t be able to reach large swaths of the rural population.

While selective state flagship institutions have been drawing students from rural areas for many years, only in recent years have selective private colleges joined the effort and expanded

¹⁴ McDonough, Patricia, Evelyn Gildersleeve, and Karen Jarsky. “The Golden Cage of Rural College Access: How Higher Education Can Respond to the Rural Life.” In *Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century: Identity, Place, and Community in a Globalizing World*, 191–209. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.

¹⁵ Hoxby and Avery, “The Missing ‘One-Offs.’”

¹⁶ See <https://www.palousepathways.org/> or <https://changchavkinscholars.org/> for more information.

the national coverage of rural students in higher education.¹⁷ The 2016 election may not have been the direct impetus for selective colleges to begin looking to rural areas of the country, but the election has at least brought rural communities more clearly into the conversation about underrepresented students and college admissions. Selective colleges have expanded their reach to include historically underrepresented students since the inception of affirmative action in 1961, but that reach has not extended to rural students as a particular demographic group of emphatic interest until the last five to ten years.¹⁸

A number of national organizations with the intent to target rural students specifically have arisen in recent years, including Matriculate, the College Advising Corps, and the Rural Pathways Project. National partner organizations such as the Coalition for College Access, the American Talent Initiative, and Questbridge all play key roles in helping selective colleges reach underrepresented groups of students. But still, admissions offices at selective colleges retain a responsibility to commit to recruiting, admitting, and matriculating low-income high-achieving rural students.

Selective colleges have begun to recognize the value of geographic diversity on campus and the particular challenges faced by rural students, yet these conversations have involved only a handful of practitioners with personal interests in rural access. More admissions officers and partners must be brought into the fold to help a broader range of colleges connect to and understand the talented rural students in their pool. This capstone meets that need through a series of interviews that highlight the perspectives of admissions offices and partner organizations where rural initiatives already exist in order to share best-practices towards

¹⁷ Evidence of this includes public initiatives like Swarthmore's "Small Towns at Swarthmore," as well as two newly formed working groups at the Coalition for College and the National Association for College Admissions Counseling.

¹⁸ With the exception of state flagship universities.

increasing access for low-income high-achieving rural students. I propose that meeting the needs of rural students in selective college admissions requires a three-pronged policy solution: expanding the scope of recruitment travel, committing to “plus-factor” status for rural students in admissions decision-making, and providing admissions programming specific to rural students. As Ruiz and Perna argue, “explicitly recognizing the needs and attributes of rural students will enable these students – and our nation – to realize the numerous benefits of college attainment.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Ruiz, Roman, and Laura W Perna. “The Geography of College Attainment: Dismantling Rural ‘Disadvantage.’” Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2017.

Research Questions and Scope

- 1) *How and why did a focus on low-income high-achieving rural students emerge in the conversation on college access?*
- 2) *How does being rural exacerbate existing patterns of undermatch among low-income high-achieving students through the college admissions process?*
- 3) *How have admissions officers at selective²⁰ four-year colleges made efforts to recruit and matriculate low-income high-achieving rural students?*
- 4) *How are rural perspectives considered and evaluated through the admissions process, and what unique supports might rural students receive to encourage their matriculation?*

Undermatch, of course, is a problem for all low-income high-achievers, not just rural students. I am interested specifically in rural students because of the added complexities of geographic isolation and the sociocultural effects of rural *habitus*. In addition, many of the conversations surrounding mobility and college access for low-income students often forgo considerations of geographic context. I focus on selective schools and rural high-achievers because of the many other paths relevant to lower-performing rural students. An education at a selective college may not be for every rural student, for academic or personal reasons.

Opportunities at two-year colleges and trade schools abound for other low-income rural students.²¹ Many talented students might also find success at a community college or trade school. Still, high-achieving students are predisposed to find more extensive support and better outcomes at selective schools. Selective institutions (state flagship institutions, as well as elite

²⁰ Defined here as colleges with the financial resources to offer need-based aid and the academic rigor to match the qualifications of high-achieving students

²¹ Koricich, Andrew. "The Effects of Rurality on College Access and Choice." Texas Tech University, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership, 2014.

private institutions) often provide better aid opportunities,²² higher graduation rates,²³ and greater economic mobility.²⁴ Further, selective colleges are an important bellwether for all American colleges, sending a broader message about what backgrounds, experiences, and talents merit representation in higher education (look to the extensive coverage of the recent *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* lawsuit, or the outcry over the 2019 admissions bribery scandal, for example). Finally, I've decided to focus solely on the admissions process, and not the full extent of a rural student's experiences on campus. How students adjust to the rest of the college experience post-matriculation is no longer necessarily the admissions office's purview, but the admissions office can pass along relevant information to help faculty in other departments (including first-generation or low-income organizations) to support those students. A more extensive study would address rural students' experiences on campus, and the extent and efficacy of available support systems.

²² Cohodes, S. R., and J. S. Goodman. "Merit Aid, College Quality, and College Completion: Massachusetts' Adams Scholarship as an in-Kind Subsidy." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 6, no. 4 (2014): 251–85.

²³ Zimmerman, S.D. "The Returns to College Admission for Academically Marginal Students." *Journal of Labor Economics* 32, no. 4 (2014): 711–54.

²⁴ Haveman, Robert, and Timothy Smeeding. "The Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility." *The Future of Children* 16, no. 2 (2006): 125–50.

Literature Review

“Undermatch” involves the gap between “income-typical” and “achievement-typical” college admissions behavior among low-income high-achieving students.²⁵ “Income-typical” students apply to the same array of colleges as peers of their income-level, regardless of achievement; “achievement-typical” students apply to the same array of colleges as peers of their achievement level, regardless of their income. Higher-income students are more likely to behave according to achievement level rather than income—to apply to more selective schools—while the inverse is true for lower-income students. Undermatch is particularly prevalent among low-income rural students, more so than their low-income urban counterparts. While the literature on undermatch alludes to geographic context and the particularities of rural communities, this body of work does not make specific recommendations for rural students. This is where my literature review operates: using the “income-typical” versus “achievement-typical” framework, I focus on what specifically can be done for low-income high-achieving rural students.

With that in mind, this literature review surveys three aspects of the undermatch problem: barriers to college access for low-income rural students, existing patterns of college attendance for low-income rural students despite those barriers, and existing practices among selective colleges aimed at overcoming those barriers.

Barriers to College Access

Benjamin Robbins, a 2012 Yale undergraduate in Sociology, best summed up the challenges of selective college attainment for low-income rural students with the title of his essay, “People Like Us Don’t Go There.”²⁶ Talented rural students face socioeconomic,

²⁵ Hoxby and Avery, “The Missing ‘One-Offs.’”

²⁶ Robbins, Benjamin. “‘People Like Us Don’t Go There’: Local Culture and College Aspirations in Rural Nebraska.” *Yale Journal of Sociology* 9 (Fall 2012).

geographic, and informational barriers in their search for a college of the right fit, and these barriers manifest in the social and cultural way of life in rural communities. The self-perception that a selective college just “isn’t for someone like me” is an indication of an underlying operative force: rural students’ isolation from concentrations of social and cultural capital found in urban areas.²⁷ Rural high schools graduate students in numbers at or above suburban or urban schools, and many encourage a “college-going” culture, but this emphasis on college enrollment often fails to account for high-achievers’ aspirations. Rural high school guidance counselors, with limited knowledge about selective colleges, encourage matriculation at less-selective local or state institutions. Two-year and technical colleges, because of their existing integration into rural communities, become the natural next step for low-income rural students regardless of achievement level.²⁸ This inclination towards technical and trade schools widens the geographic divide between the kinds of knowledge accumulated in higher education: a technical or trade education for the rural poor and a liberal arts education for the urban and suburban middle and upper classes.²⁹

Yet, a rural education brings its own distinct advantages, too. Rural schools and rural communities complement each other.³⁰ Students from rural Appalachia who do attend college note a heightened appreciation and investment in their small town. Some note the importance of family, a strong sense of community, a belief in “common sense” over intellectual ability, a

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky, “The Golden Cage of Rural College Access.”

²⁹ Theobald, Paul. “The New Vocationalism in Rural Locales.” Montreal, Quebec: Annual Meeting of the American Educational Studies Association, November 1996.

³⁰ See Tieken, *Why Rural Schools Matter*. Tieken’s portrayal of the community of Delight, Arkansas encapsulates many of these ideas in narrative form.

strong work ethic, and strong religious beliefs.³¹ Rural students' success depends, in large part, on the social context of their small town.³² Perhaps this is why rural high schools continue to outpace suburban and urban graduation rates³³: the strength of the surrounding community. The “Golden Cage,” then, this tight-knit social ecosystem, can be a force driving students toward achievement in rural schools. Even so, high-achieving students, with the aid of their educators and parents, must then cope with the challenge of deciding whether to remain close to or cut ties with the community they grew up in. The growth in outmigration of high-achieving rural students contributes to the phenomena of rural “brain drain” and the deterioration of rural communities.³⁴ This poses another difficult question for selective college admissions: does admitting a high-achieving rural student—extracting them from their local community—contribute to the brain drain problem?

In brief, the literature points to a number of factors that reinforce barriers to college enrollment for low-income high-achieving rural students. High school counselors, who often struggle with disproportionately high student-to-counselor ratios, do not have the resources or information to support their most talented students.³⁵ Students lack peers, family, or mentors with the social capital or experience with college admissions to form high expectations about their college opportunities.³⁶ The lack of academic rigor—both in course offerings and social

³¹ Dees, D.M. “‘How Do I Deal With These New Ideas?’: The Psychological Acculturation of Rural Students.” *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 2006.; Crain, Andrew. “Serving Rural Students.” National Association of Colleges and Employers, May 2018.

³² Wilcox et al., “The Value of People, Place and Possibilities.”

³³ National Center for Education Statistics. “The Status of Rural Education.” *The Condition of Education*. US Department of Education, May 2013.

³⁴ See Carr and Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*.

³⁵ Burney, Virginia H., and Tracy L. Cross. “Impoverished Students with Academic Promise in Rural Settings: 10 Lessons from Project Aspire.” *Gifted Child Today* 29, no. 2 (April 2006): 14–21.

³⁶ Chenoweth, Erica, and Renee V Galliher. “Factors Influencing College Aspirations of Rural West Virginia High School Students.” *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 19, no. 2 (October 2004): 14.

expectations of success—fails to prepare students for college-level work and entrenches a negative self-concept of one’s fit for a selective college.³⁷ Lastly, low-income students are often given incomplete information about their college opportunities, especially financial aid, and may not realize that a selective college offers better need-based opportunities than the merit aid available at a local or state school.³⁸

While the research often mentions rural *habitus*—the “Golden Cage”—as a cultural barrier to matriculation at a selective school where a student has been accepted, the data do not necessarily support that claim. Hoxby and Turner argue, rather, that “it is at the application stage—not admissions or matriculation—where low-income high achievers diverge from their higher-income counterparts.”³⁹ Hoxby and Turner’s report on the Expanding College Opportunity (ECO) project reports that “Contrary to some beliefs, culture and/or lack of aspiration do not appear to be important factors in explaining why low-income high achievers apply to nonselective colleges [...]. In the ECO survey, low-income high achievers express no hesitancy about attending the best college to which they can gain admission and that they can afford.”⁴⁰

This discrepancy in the research—about whether the rural college attainment gap results from a lack of aspiration or other factors—persists in conversations about rural college access.

Research shows that, by the early 1990s, any aspirational divide between rural and urban

³⁷ Wyner, Joshua, John Bridgeland, and John Dilulio, Jr. “Achievement Trap: How America Is Failing Millions of Students from Lower-Income Families.” Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, n.d.

³⁸ Griffin, Dana, Bryan C. Hutchins, and Judith L. Meece. “Where Do Rural High School Students Go to Find Information About Their Futures?” *Journal of Counseling & Development* 89, no. 2 (April 1, 2011): 172–81.

³⁹ Hoxby, Caroline, and Sarah Turner. “What High-Achieving Low-Income Students Know About College.” NBER Working Paper Series. National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2015.

⁴⁰ Hoxby, Caroline M, and Sarah Turner. “Informing Students about Their College Options: A Proposal for Broadening the Expanding College Opportunities Project.” The Hamilton Project, June 2013.

students had essentially disappeared.⁴¹ Megan Taylor at the University of Michigan, in a webinar on rural college access, proposes a more precise accounting of the problem: “Rurality structures student *exposure* to higher education, *not* their aspirations or valuation of higher education.”⁴²

Taylor does not imply that the culture of rural communities has no relation to patterns of college attainment for rural high-achievers, but only that, given better information about how and why to apply to college, rural *habitus* would be a non-factor. Put simply: *having* aspirations and *pursuing* aspirations are two entirely different things.

This finding is encouraging for many researchers and practitioners: it implies that, if low-income high-achieving students only had adequate *information* about selective colleges, they would be more likely to apply. Clear, personal, and targeted outreach may be all it takes.

Patterns of College Attendance Among Low-Income High-Achieving Rural Students

These factors are not unique to rural students. They pervade low-income and under-resourced schools in every geographic context. Nevertheless, despite the myriad barriers plaguing a low-income high-achieving urban student’s college search, they are still *within a near enough geographic proximity* to concentrations of social and cultural capital that they have more opportunities to find support—through national college access partners, CBOs, or admissions offices themselves.⁴³ Despite graduating in similar numbers to suburban students, only 54% of rural students apply to college, compared to 57% of urban students and 62% of suburban students.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Apostol, Robert, and Janet Bilden. “Educational and Occupational Aspirations of Rural High School Students.” *Journal of Career Development* 18, no. 2 (December 1, 1991): 153–60.

⁴² Taylor, Megan, and Andrew Moe. “Supporting Rural Students Through the College Admissions Process.” Webinar, University of Michigan, May 9, 2018.

⁴³ Turley, “College Proximity.”

⁴⁴ Bowen, William G., Martin A. Kurzweil, and Eugene M. Tobin. *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2005. 227.

As a result of low application rates, college attendance and attainment lags for rural students, too. Rural students are less likely to attend a selective college, more likely to delay their matriculation, and less likely to be continuously enrolled in college. These patterns stem, as described, from differences in socioeconomic status and high school preparation, along with a lack of rural mentors or peer-groups.⁴⁵ Undermatch occurs most often at the point of application, indicating that once a student has gone so far as to apply to a selective school, should they get accepted, their chances of matriculating—and later graduating—from that school are high.⁴⁶ Targeting the information gap in college admissions—the need for more complete knowledge about selective institutions—may help in narrowing this college attainment disparity.

One way of mapping the “situated context” in which a rural student—or any student, for that matter—decides if and where to apply to college is Perna’s proposed conceptual model of student college choice (see Fig. 1 below). The Perna model bridges two fields of thought on college choice: the human capital investment model and the sociological model. The human capital investment model argues that a student’s college choice is a balance of perceived costs and benefits determined by their environmental *habitus* (“The Golden Cage”, for McDonough et al.). Perna takes this model as the center of a larger web of other sociological influences: the school and community context; the higher education context; and the social, economic, and policy context. Perna’s student choice model provides a measured justification for the impact that college admissions offices themselves can play in the college choice process. Though a student’s *habitus*—their accumulated social and cultural capital, or lack thereof—and the resources available in their immediate context certainly have a more direct impact on their

⁴⁵ Byun et al. “Rural-Nonrural Disparities in Postsecondary Educational Attainment Revisited.”; Byun, Soo-yong, Judith L. Meece, and Charlotte A. Agger. “Predictors of College Attendance Patterns of Rural Youth.” *Research in Higher Education* 58, no. 8 (December 2017): 817–42.

⁴⁶ Hoxby and Avery, “The Missing ‘One-Offs.’”

college choice, the higher education context interacts with student choice across layers. Colleges impact student choice in that they may be an important source of information about college more generally and in that students are most likely to choose a college with perceived characteristics most similar to their social identity.⁴⁷ Selective colleges, whether the state flagship university or a small liberal arts college, may miss rural students in both senses. They may not adequately invest information or resources (e.g. mail or officer visits) in geographically isolated areas, and they may struggle to appeal to a rural student's self-perception of the college best fit for them.

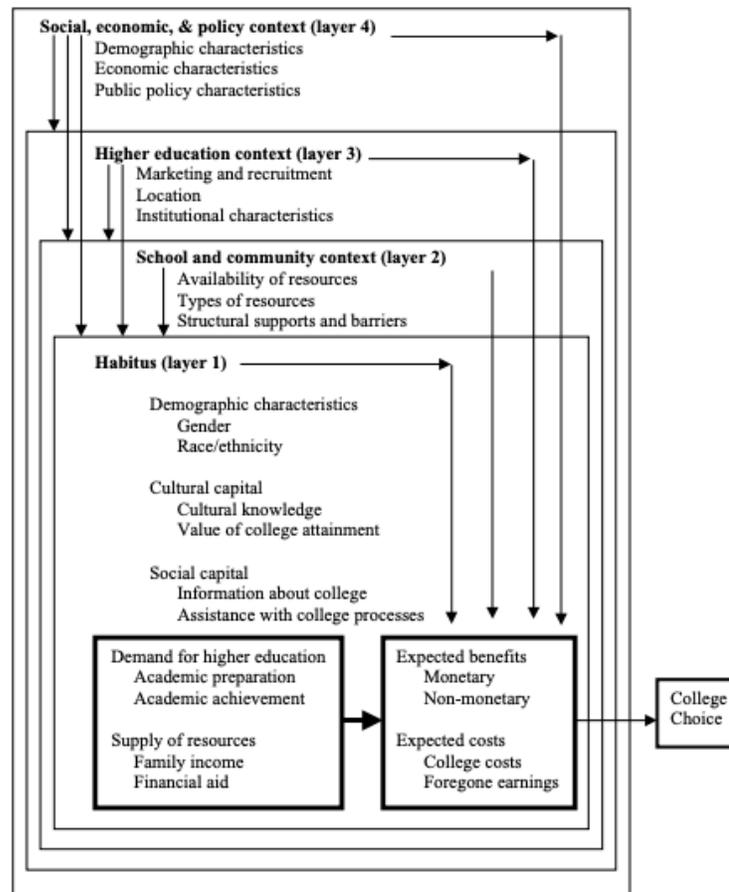


Fig. 1: Conceptual Model of Student Choice⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Perna, Laura. "Studying College Access and Choice: A Proposed Conceptual Model." *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* 21 (2006): 99–157.118.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Despite its usefulness in contextualizing this ecosystem of choice, one key layer that this model misses is the layer of third-party organizations. Third-party advocacy groups like the Coalition for College Access, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), and Questbridge tie together selective colleges, providing avenues for shared practice among college partners and bridging historically underrepresented students to America's best colleges and universities. These partners are essential to the efforts currently underway to share best-practices for working with rural students, among other demographics of interest.

Existing Practices in the Selective College Admissions Network

The selective college attainment gap is exacerbated, to some extent, by the traditional practices of college admissions offices. As Hoxby and Avery found, 70% of achievement-typical low-income students (low-income high-achieving students who apply to the same colleges as their higher-income high-achieving peers) come from the same fifteen metropolitan areas. For selective colleges hoping for a higher return of disadvantaged students, it is more cost-effective to recruit from metropolitan regions in which they are already present. Hoxby and Avery call this the “lamppost” effect, the idea that “colleges look for low-income students where the *college* is instead of looking for low-income students where the *students* are.”⁴⁹

Still, little literature exists that explores ongoing practices within selective colleges to recruit and yield low-income high-achieving rural students. The academic work that has been done has become deeply politicized in the media.⁵⁰ This is in part because rural white men are more likely than any other demographic of low-income high school students to undermatch in their college choice.⁵¹ For example, participation in career-oriented rural extracurricular

⁴⁹ Hoxby and Avery, “The Missing ‘One-Offs.’” 44.

⁵⁰ Steinmetz, Katy. “Do Colleges Discriminate Against Poor Whites?” *Time*, July 8, 2010.

⁵¹ Smith, Jonathan, Matea Pender, and Jessica Howell. “The Full Extent of Student-College Academic Undermatch.” *Economics of Education Review*, 2013, 247–61.

opportunities like 4-H or Future Farmers of America (FFA) correlates with a lower acceptance rate at selective colleges.⁵² These findings fuel conservative skepticism of American affirmative action policy and reinforce a narrative that an elite liberal education just “isn’t for” the white rural working-class. In a 2010 *New York Times* op-ed, Ross Douthat argued that, “Among the highly educated and liberal, meanwhile, the lack of contact with rural, working-class America generates all sorts of wild anxieties about what’s being plotted in the heartland.”⁵³

In addition, colleges (especially liberal arts colleges) struggle to appeal to students for whom a college degree may appear to have little practical pay-off. Sociologist Michael Corbett argues that the language of higher education for low-income rural students operates in “competitive,” “pragmatic,” “security,” and “entrepreneurial” frames, and less often in an “exploratory” frame. For that reason, rural students are less likely to apply to a liberal arts college and less likely to matriculate there if accepted.⁵⁴ These problems of perception in rural communities require of admissions offices the kind of conscious rural-specific programming and messaging to appeal to students who might not otherwise realize why a selective college might be a good choice for them.

One recent study that does explore the agency college admissions offices have in the application process comes from the University of Michigan. Dynarski et al. conducted an experimental study to test the effect of an “inexpensive, targeted, personalized outreach

⁵² Epenshade, Thomas, and Alexandria Radford. “What Counts in Being Admitted?” In *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admission and Campus Life*, 83–151. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

⁵³ Douthat, Ross. “The Roots of White Anxiety.” *The New York Times*, July 18, 2010. This is a dangerous monolithic assumption that ignores the diverse nature of rural America, racially and otherwise.

⁵⁴ Corbett, Michael. “No Time to Fool around with the Wrong Education: Socialisation Frames, Timing and High-Stakes Educational Decision Making in Changing Rural Places.” *Rural Society* 19, no. 2 (2009): 163–77.; Crain, “Serving Rural Students.”

campaign” for low-income students from rural Michigan.⁵⁵ The High Achieving Involved Leadership (HAIL) scholarship already existed prior to the study, but the authors were interested in what low-income high-achieving students they were missing in their recruitment efforts. The three barriers identified by the authors all had to do with the application barrier: students faced “uncertainty about their suitability for an elite school, over-estimates of the (net) cost of college, and procedural barriers such as financial aid forms.” The treatment group received a personalized mailing that encouraged their application, promised free tuition, and eliminated the need to fill out financial aid forms. Application rates to the University of Michigan more than *doubled* for treatment students (and, unintentionally, application to *any* selective college, Michigan or otherwise, also doubled for the treatment group).⁵⁶

Other initiatives, like the Expanding College Opportunities (ECO) Project, reinforce the idea that a targeted, personalized strategy to connect low-income high-achieving rural students to information about the opportunities available to them at selective colleges increases their chances of applying to a school that matches their abilities. ECO, like the experiment done at Michigan, was a low-cost,⁵⁷ high-reward investment that relied almost entirely on direct mail outreach. Mailings included information on the college process, opportunities available at selective colleges, and financial aid relevant to their financial situation. Students that responded to the intervention applied to significantly more selective schools and were usually admitted to and matriculated at those schools.⁵⁸ ECO’s efforts were independent of any particular institution, but,

⁵⁵ Dynarski, Susan, C.J. Libassi, Katherine Micheltmore, and Stephanie Owen. “Closing the Gap: The Effect of a Targeted, Tuition-Free Promise on College Choices of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students.” NBER Working Paper Series. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2018.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ About \$6 per student.

⁵⁸ Hoxby and Turner, “Informing Students about Their College Options.”

like many of the groups who partner with selective colleges, this project provides clear, actionable steps for selective colleges to take in attempting to reach rural students.

The question remains about what kind of institutional advantage, if any, to give to a low-income high-achieving rural student through the admissions process. Bowen et al. warn in *Equity and Excellence in Higher Education* that a shift to class-based affirmative action in place of race-based affirmative action would cause the number of undergraduate minority students to fall by half.⁵⁹ Bowen et al. argue instead that “preferences for socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants, if properly tailored, could serve as a useful *complement* to race-sensitive admissions.”⁶⁰ Bowen et al. instead propose “plus-factor,” or “thumb-on-the-scale” admissions priority for particular candidates in concert with from race-affirmative admissions. “Rurality” is not an explicit focus of the authors’ work, but the argument for a thumb-on-the-scale approach for low-income rural students involves the same four key justifications: (1) low-income and first-generation students are underrepresented at selective colleges, (2) enrolling economically disadvantaged students increases social mobility, (3) those who have “bucked the odds” to get into the pool deserve special recognition, and (4) economically disadvantaged students perform just as well as their wealthier peers in college.⁶¹

In summary, the literature on undermatch in American higher education is extensive, and has begun to explore the experiences of low-income, high-achieving rural students. Reservations about one’s fit for a selective school, misinformation about financial aid, and apprehension about the application and financial aid processes all prohibit low-income high-achieving rural students

⁵⁹ Though, as mentioned above, a quarter of rural students are racial minorities. The racial makeup of rural students varies significantly by geographic region, which necessitates a holistic review process that includes geographic background as one identity that intersects with many others.

⁶⁰ Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*. 255.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 176-177.

from applying to selective colleges. Initiatives do exist within selective colleges (and through third-party partner organizations) aimed at better recruiting and matriculating historically underrepresented students.⁶² Many of these strategies already include low-income rural students, as a product of their socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, or other characteristics. However, efforts to better understand and recruit from rural communities in particular are still in their early stages.

⁶² Glynn, Jennifer. "Opening Doors: How Selective Colleges and Universities Are Expanding Access for High-Achieving, Low-Income Students." Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. Accessed October 3, 2018.

Methodology

This capstone incorporates interviews from six selective colleges and three partner organizations. These sources provide “ground-truth” answers to my four research questions: (1) how officers and partners came to prioritize “rurality” as a unique demographic identity, (2) the challenges they’ve encountered in bringing rural students into the application pool, (3) the successful innovations they’ve made in recruiting rural students, and (4) their experiences evaluating, admitting, and matriculating rural students already in their pool.

This research unfolded snowball-style in multiple respects: my conversations with admissions officers were usually what connected me with other admissions officers, but I was also aided by resources like the Rural Student Access Network Facebook group, the Rural and Small Towns Special Interest Group, data from specific admissions offices on classifying and codifying rural schools, PowerPoint presentation notes, podcasts, and webinar recordings. This research is less a systematic sociological analysis of admissions officers, and more a deep-dive into the new movement in higher admissions to recruit rural students.

My interviews began on my own college campus at Yale, with existing connections through my work as a Senior Interviewer for the Yale Office of Undergraduate Admissions. I spoke to six officers across five university admissions offices, including state flagships, elite research universities, and small liberal arts colleges. As much as possible, I’ve represented the full spread of “selective” colleges, in terms of size and geographic context, though I was limited by the response rate of the admissions officers I contacted. Each of these offices had already, in some way, demonstrated a commitment to recruiting rural students. For some, that may have been a page on their website targeted at rural students, for others it may have been a news article, for others it may have been simply that one of their officers was a member of the Rural Student

Access Network Facebook group. Many were suggested to me through previous interviews.⁶³ I spoke to three partner organizations that were suggested to me by my advisors.

Any risk of mischaracterizing an institution is my own, and for that reason I do not identify individual institutions in my findings and analysis. Discussion of particular identifiable institutions is only made when that same information is also available publicly (Swarthmore's "Small Towns at Swarthmore" initiative, for example, which has been the subject of multiple high-profile news articles and podcasts). Invitations were sent over email (see Appendix A for form email). In my initial invitation I outlined the intent and purpose of the study. I also asked for participants' agreement to participate in the interview and their consent to my recording (see Appendix C for consent form). In the case of an interviewee that did not consent to my recording, I took journalistic notes during our conversation. I worked from a semi-structured interview script and kept interviews to approximately 30-45 minutes in length. I made slight adjustments from interview to interview based on my evaluative reflections on the original script (see Appendix B for original script). My conversations with partner organizations were much more conversational, advisory exchanges, which worked off of a basic script structure but are not represented as frequently in my findings as my admissions officer interviews only because these partners were not working with students in the same capacity as admissions officers.

I conducted interviews in January and February 2019. One interview took place in-person on campus, and the rest took place over phone or video chat. I conducted in-person interviews using the Voice Memos app on the Apple iPhone, and remote interviews over the phone or through Zoom in a private location. I recorded phone interviews using QuickTime on my laptop, and Zoom interviews using the record function on Zoom. I stored all identifying information

⁶³ One member of the Coalition for College Access's Rural and Small Towns Working Group was able to connect me to other members of the working group, for example.

about each interviewee in a password protected file on my computer, and all recordings were destroyed. I transcribed these interviews myself using a transcription app.

As noted, I selected subjects with a known focus on rural students, in order to share their experiences more broadly. In analyzing these interviews, I was not seeking to scrutinize or criticize existing practices. Rather, I sought out ground-truth experiences from admissions officers working with low-income high-achieving rural students and families—how the challenges I found in the literature are borne out in experience, what strategies have and haven't worked in recruiting and matriculating these students, and what solutions may be generalizable for the college access network more broadly.

These are the individuals working with these students every day and thinking about issues of equity and geographic diversity. Their enthusiasm for rural students and for this project guided me through the research process.

Findings and Analysis

The following findings have been grouped into four categories, distinguished by their relevance to the four questions proposed above: (1) defining “rurality” and its value on college campuses, (2) identifying rural barriers to access at selective colleges, (3) proposing innovative recruitment strategies, and (4) thinking about a student’s rural context through the evaluation and matriculation processes. Participants’ responses have not been analyzed in a quantitative way simply because of the relatively small number of interviews, but are instead presented here as a qualitative sample of the conversations focused on rural students going on in higher education admissions circles.

“Rurality” and Selective Colleges

How and why did a focus on low-income high-achieving rural students emerge in the conversation on college access?

In the time this research was conducted, advocacy groups for rural students were springing up in multiple places at once. The Rural Student Access Network Facebook page, a collection of over 400 practitioners at high schools, colleges, and partner organizations, formed in the fall of 2018. The Coalition for College’s Rural and Small Town working group and the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) Rural and Small Town special interest group both formed in the last year as well. Many of the same people are involved across organizations, but these groups’ popularity indicates a growing institutional interest in rural perspectives.

Officers are interested in rural perspectives for a variety of reasons. Some noted personal experiences growing up in rural areas, while others saw advocating for rural students as a natural

extension of their access goals. From an admissions officer with a rural background at a small liberal arts college:

[One priority] is certainly the asset approach of rural students coming to institutions and adding to the diverse fabric, talking about things in an economics class and thinking about access to healthcare resources, someone from a rural area has a very different take on that than someone coming from inner-city Philadelphia with a lot of access or proximity to resources. [...] I think that rural students bring those perspectives to our campus, and they are, from a research standpoint, deeply underrepresented at selective schools. [...] If you look at the numbers, they might be the most underrepresented students in higher education. Because there's not the same affirmative action that you have a) for underrepresented students of color but also b) legacies, and c) athletics, so if you start thinking about all of the spaces that are taken by a lot of the institutional priorities, rural students are often very unhooked in this process and there isn't the same institutional priority given to them.⁶⁴

This comment doesn't propose doing away with existing race-based affirmative supports, or affirmative policy for legacy or athletic candidates, but does highlight the overlooked nature of rural students in the selective admissions process. Not only are those students missing the opportunity to attend a selective school, those schools lack a perspective that could otherwise enhance on-campus diversity more broadly. That benefit doesn't only come from the classroom, either. At a small liberal arts college that is itself rural, one officer mentioned how their campus environment reflects aspects of a rural student's home community:

[Our college is] a rural community. We're surrounded by cornfields. And our campus culture is really defined by the tight-knit community network that we have here. That's true academically as well as socially. They tend to choose [our school]—among many reasons—for the fact that it's so collaborative and so community-oriented. What we've found is that rural students, because of the nature of small towns, because of the hunger to be around other academically ambitious students, rural students tend to get really involved in our community, they tend to be great leaders, they're just great for the community glue. They tend to really understand what it means to be part of a functioning small community.⁶⁵

Participants were also asked if their interest in rural students related in any way to the 2016 election and the growth of popular “discovery” narratives about rural students. No officer or partner specifically linked their own interest in rural students to the 2016 election. That said,

⁶⁴ Officer #1, Interview, January 28, 2019.

⁶⁵ Officer #6, Interview, February 8, 2019.

many agreed that the national narrative around rural students has grown, and that interest in rural students in the higher education network has grown with it.

One officer described their entry into work with rural students:

Personally, it's independent. [...] I thought, well, it's in my job description and I'm doing all these other things for LGBT and first-gen students, why wouldn't I do this? I started thinking about that back in 2015. So that was well before like this narrative of the election was coming up. But what I will say is that immediately after the election, that's when people started to notice that we were starting to think about these things. The Wall Street Journal was in touch with us and specifically asked "Are you doing this because of the Trump election?" and I said absolutely not. I understand why you're asking that question, don't get me wrong, I think a case can be made for the media focusing on rural areas as a result of the 2016 election. I think the answer's complicated. I think that there are college admissions officers and offices that were looking at this and have been looking at this for a long time and there are probably institutions that are responding to alumni interest, the media narrative, and what their peers are doing. So, I think the answer is probably yes and no in a lot of ways.⁶⁶

Most officers, as in this response, identified their interest in rural students as preceding the 2016 election. In the case of state flagship institutions, considerations for rural students have always been a part of the admissions mission, as more than one officer mentioned. At a state flagship institution, an admissions officer is assigned to each county in the state—rural, suburban, and urban alike.

From an admissions officer at a state flagship:

For us I would say it's not exactly a new development. Every county within the state [...] all of them have a different admissions counselor, and it's that admissions counselor's job to know the different high schools in the area, travel there, work with the students, work with the counselors, get them excited about [our school], get them to apply, and then help through the enrollment process. We try to have a good amount of students from every county within the state [...]. I think that we've always had [...] priority for recruiting rural students, but I think what's happening is that there's much more research and literature that's available now. Since about 2016 or so there's a big influx of people really wanting to understand the rural student. So, from the research side, yeah that's absolutely blowing up, but in regard to the recruitment side, we've always tried to get rural students here.⁶⁷

This response highlights an important caveat: that rural students are only being “discovered” in the sense that they’re being noticed in the research and by elite private

⁶⁶ Officer #1.

⁶⁷ Officer #4, Interview, January 21, 2019.

institutions. This officer calls attention to the fact that rural students have been an integral part of the mission of public flagship institutions for a long time, and that an east coast liberal arts college may not be the best selective college for every rural student.

The research on college access was also in the forefront of officers' minds. Caroline Hoxby's research on undermatch, in particular, has influenced how officers think about recruiting low-income rural students, and their emphasis on closing information gaps in the admissions process:

We have thought about our strategy for low-income students as being national and as needing to have a special ability to hit rural students outside of those metro areas, largely informed by Hoxby's research. Our reading of it really highlighted those more geographically dispersed students as the ones in most need of more knowledge. [...] What I liked about the pair of studies from Hoxby is that they identify the problem, but then they say, "Is it possible that information gaps and just getting better, clearer simpler information about this could move the needle?" [...] And the fact that that answer was so definitely "yes" gave us some confidence to say that that's how you're going to reach folks.⁶⁸

Even while the movement to recruit rural students was not explicitly politically motivated, one officer was concerned about the possibility that popular interest in rural students would wane with a new political administration:

My particular interest in rural students stemmed from that travel that I had done. It didn't really tie to the political climate at the time. It was just something that I was reading a lot of applications, I was visiting those students. After the election what we saw was schools jumping on the bandwagon. I think that [our office] had started to develop an interest prior to that, and my hope is that this higher [education] interest generally in rural students is not something that the second we have a president from a different party or that things change politically that it drops off. Because I think that there's a lot of schools that were not doing their best outreach or were overlooking students that it only came to light because of the election and because of politics in America.⁶⁹

To the extent that higher education may be influenced by the current political moment, this is a troubling concern. That interest in rural students has grown, that more schools are jumping on the "bandwagon," is a good thing. But the sustainability of a movement to advocate

⁶⁸ Officer #3, Interview, January 18, 2019.

⁶⁹ Officer #2, Interview, January 16, 2019.

for rural students cannot rely on the party in office. On the other hand, many officers talked about the nature of the movement to recruit rural students as “grassroots” and “organic,” in that individual officers at individual schools would express an interest in advocating for rural students, and other schools would rally around that interest.

Regardless, interest in rural perspectives on college campuses is higher than ever. These comments highlight rural students’ value to the college community and their need for advocates throughout the admissions process. Rural students are “unhooked” from the admissions process for many reasons: the information gaps and lower social expectations that structure a rural student’s exposure to higher education.⁷⁰ These barriers come into play in real ways throughout the selective admissions process.

Barriers to Access for Rural Students

How does being rural exacerbate existing patterns of undermatch among low-income high-achieving students through the college admissions process?

Questions about access barriers for rural students centered around admissions officers’ experiences trying to recruit in rural parts of the country. These questions ran along the lines of “What are some of the recurrent barriers or challenges that you’ve encountered in recruiting rural students?” These answers included reflections on travel experiences, communication with counselors and CBO partners, and work through the application and financial aid processes with rural students. I was also particularly interested in the point at which these officers encountered these barriers. Some identified recruitment—getting rural students into the application pool—as the key issue for their school, while others felt that matriculating an accepted rural student was

⁷⁰ Chenoweth and Galliher, “Factors Influencing College Aspirations of Rural West Virginia High School Students”; Wyner, Bridgeland, and Dilulio, Jr., “Achievement Trap: How America Is Failing Millions of Students from Lower-Income Families”; Taylor and Moe, “Supporting Rural Students Through the College Admissions Process.”

actually the bigger challenge. Both may be true in different institutional contexts, but this point will resurface in my discussion on the evaluation and matriculation process.

Three emergent barriers that I identified in these interviews included: information and resource disparities, cultural and familial limitations, and inequities within the admissions recruitment process itself.

Information and Resource Disparities

A common barrier for all low-income students, regardless of geographic context, is that they lack the information and resources—about the college landscape, about financial aid, about how to write a college essay, etc.—to make informed decisions about their college experience. However, one unique challenge mentioned across interviews was the lack of community-based organizations (CBOs) present in rural areas to provide extra support to low-income high-achievers. In this way, support for rural students often comes in the form of national organizations like Questbridge and Matriculate.

One admissions officer spoke to this point:

The problem is that rural and small-town students don't often have access to CBOs. And that is very different when you're thinking about the low-income student coming from the city that has access to Educational Talent Search, to Summer Search, there's literally thousands of organizations out there. I can probably make a list in about five minutes of CBOs that serve or exclusively serve rural and small-town students. I think it is the national programs that have a lot more weight.⁷¹

Another mentioned urban CBOs and the “network” they create for low-income urban students:

I think in the urban areas interest has been so high for so many years going into places like the south side of Chicago and Detroit and LA, that interest has been there for ten, fifteen, twenty years. That's because a lot of those places offer diversity in the more traditional sense that schools are really interested in. Because of that, what's happened is that a lot of CBOs have founded. The CBOs are so much more heavily concentrated in the urban areas. The CBO acts as a network for these students.⁷²

⁷¹ Officer #1.

⁷² Officer #2.

Certainly, urban CBOs aren't able to adequately serve *every* low-income high-achieving urban student, and this isn't to say that socioeconomic inequities don't abound in urban environments. This is only to say that low-income high-achieving urban students remain in close enough geographic proximity to stand a better chance of being recruited by a CBO and eventually a selective college.

Most other comments on information and resource disparities had to do with the network that surrounds a low-income high-achieving rural student: the teachers, counselors, and other mentors that could be in a rural student's corner through the admissions process. Many commented on overworked guidance counselors in rural areas, and the many responsibilities that keep them from adequately supporting their most talented students:

If you're a high-achieving student in a school where most people aren't going on to college, the person who's a counselor there really doesn't have any time for you. You're easy, you're done, you're on your way. It doesn't make sense for her to spend her time working with you, and even getting to know you. That person may have never met the student because they're dealing with truancy, they're dealing with social workers, they're dealing with parents who are addicted to drugs, they're dealing with students who are in danger of not graduating, they probably have more experience with the military recruiter than they do even with the state flagship institution.⁷³

Another officer echoed this point:

High school counselors in rural, under-resourced areas, they're wearing seven different hats. They could be the school registrar, they could be the school planner, they could be going to a student's probation officer, all kinds of other things. [...] There's just not enough resources inside of the high schools to really push home to these rural students that college is a possibility. [...] The counselors of course want to make the students believe that, but they simply do not have the time.⁷⁴

Many officers talked about the essential complexity of the college admissions process, from the application itself to financial aid forms to deadlines, and so on:

Do I use the Common App? Do I use the Coalition App? Does the school have their own application, what do I send in? To where? When? How? [...] If we compare to a Phillips Andover, a very good private school, their high school guidance counselors, that's all they do. They've visited these colleges, they know

⁷³ Officer #3.

⁷⁴ Officer #4.

*the admissions counselors, so on and so forth. [...] Right out of the gate, for so many rural students their environment is putting them at a disadvantage before they even try.*⁷⁵

Unique to rural students, as well, are the kinds of concerns raised in talking about financial aid. Even at institutions that offer full need-based financial aid, it can be difficult for the school to understand out of context the value of a rural family's assets and for the rural family to understand how to correctly complete financial aid forms.⁷⁶ One surprising obstacle was simply that a rural student might not even recognize that they're low-income. Not recognizing that fact could preclude a student from seeking out college access or financial aid resources, like the Questbridge scholarship:

*For a lot of rural students [...] they don't necessarily identify as low-income because a household income of \$40,000 in a rural area may actually put a family pretty comfortable, middle-income in their community. When we're saying under \$65,000 for a family of four, that's really different. I know for me, in my community that's a pretty comfortable family.*⁷⁷

As discussed earlier, the most immediate barrier for low-income rural students is simply that they aren't receiving adequate knowledge about how and why to apply to a selective college.⁷⁸ Myriad factors may be contributing to that informational gap: they may not be taking standardized tests as early as their suburban or urban peers, a selective admissions officer may be less likely to visit their school, their parents and counselors may be unfamiliar with selective admissions, or they may just not realize that an education at a selective school may likely be cheaper than an education at a less selective local or state institution.

⁷⁵ Officer #4.

⁷⁶ Officer #5, Interview, February 7, 2019. This officer also described how land ownership for rural families may inflate their financial aid portfolio, even while that family may not be capable of leveraging that kind of generational asset.

⁷⁷ Partner #1, Interview, January 23, 2019.

⁷⁸ Griffin, Hutchins, and Meece, "Where Do Rural High School Students Go to Find Information About Their Futures?"

Cultural and Familial Limitations

While Hoxby and Turner’s work on the Expanding College Opportunities (ECO) Project discounted cultural and familial factors as part of a low-income rural student’s decision-making process, many of the officers I interviewed alluded to the difficult cultural transition for both the student and their parent in applying to and matriculating at a selective college.⁷⁹ This harkens back to Megan Taylor’s comment about the way that being rural “structures” a student’s college aspirations.⁸⁰ Aspiring to go to college, in the abstract, is a goal shared by most low-income rural students. But even after being accepted at a selective school, without a fly-in visit, virtual tour, conversation with a current student, or other intervention, the actual college experience itself is still abstract. The abstract idea of college brings with it fears for all students, but those fears are heightened for low-income rural students without any prior exposure to the unfamiliar college environment, socially and academically.

In these interviews, student concerns ranged from fundamental doubts about their abilities and fit for selective schools to banal everyday worries about what their life at a selective school might look like.

One partner organization representative from a rural background commented:

*We try focusing a lot of our messaging around some core questions: Do the schools want me? They wouldn’t want me. Can I get in? If I get in, can I afford it? Will I fit in? For me when I was applying to college—I wound up going to [selective school]—my entire thing going there was, “I’m going to be miserable for four years, because there’s no way that I could be happy there. But I’ll graduate with a degree from there and it will be worth a painful four years.” Obviously, that’s not the way it turned out, but I think that that’s a big piece of the assumption for students is just it’s so foreign. Especially for rural students, who don’t have any exposure.*⁸¹

⁷⁹ Perhaps more importantly, just the fact that a low-income rural student still decides to go to a selective college doesn’t mean that the transition isn’t challenging or uncomfortable in ways unique to these students. It is worth thinking about how to ease the transition, regardless.

⁸⁰ Taylor and Moe, “Supporting Rural Students Through the College Admissions Process.”

⁸¹ Partner #1.

One officer talked about the many distractions keeping a low-income rural student from being able to focus on the college application process:

I find that many of these rural low-income students, they've got a part-time job, maybe they're helping take care of little brothers and sisters, so when it comes time for junior and senior year to roll around, they're not 100% focused on their applications.⁸²

Many students have more basic day-to-day concerns, as another officer mentioned:

The concerns with admitted students tend to be around things of—some expected stuff, “Will I fit in? Is there a dominant campus culture that’s somehow connected to the Northeast? Is everyone gonna be talking about their yachts and popping their polo collars?” and those kinds of things, but I also find it’s a lot of just basic way-of-life things, like “Is there a Walmart close by? Where do you buy socks?” It is a paradigm shift in terms of the urban experience relative to that that I do find myself sometimes emphasizing the basic elements of what living your life is like and reassuring them that those kinds of quotidian things continue even while you’re at this kind of institution.⁸³

Particularly interesting were officers’ reflections on their interactions with rural parents.

As one officer described:

I think that what happens with families is that they don’t think their kid is going to get accepted. So, a lot of times they’ll be like, “Sure, go ahead, apply.” They don’t think anything’s gonna happen, and then if their student gets in it becomes kind of this reality check. And a lot of times they’re not necessarily unsupportive, the word I like to use is “non-supportive.” Immediately they’ll say “Oh, well, you can do what you want. If you want to do that, okay. But you do have a full ride at this other place close to home. That’s really far away, you won’t be able to come home much, but you can do what you want.” It’s always that “make your own choice” idea, but there’s not the support of “We’ll come visit you. We’ll take you there. We’ll help you by any means necessary.” That non-supportiveness is a major hurdle I’ve found.⁸⁴

Another officer from a rural background mentioned a similar trend in terms of how the selective college affects the relationship between a low-income rural student and their family:

It truly it runs the gamut from parents just don’t understand why their son or daughter would want to go to college, to “How are we gonna pay for this?” to “What are you gonna do afterward?” to “Is college gonna make you an entirely different person?” All kinds of different things. [...] I call it “gaining a disconnect.” Cause when I would go back home I was just like “oh, hm.” You know, it’s nothing against my parents or my family members or things like that, but college really opens up your eyes to various arguments, logical pitfalls and all of that, and when you’re talking with your family, maybe who isn’t educated, you can feel a huge disconnect.⁸⁵

⁸² Officer #4.

⁸³ Officer #3.

⁸⁴ Officer #2.

⁸⁵ Officer #4.

No family, rural or otherwise, approaches the college transition in the same way. But given the fact that attending a selective college entails such a huge geographic and psychological leap for a student, both the student and their family might hold reservations about their fit for a selective school. In some cases that might mean that the student never applies in the first place, but at least one officer mentioned having admitted students that ultimately decided not to attend the selective college they had been admitted to at all, opting for a school closer to home instead. These aspects of the social ecosystem that a rural student inhabits all impact their pathway through the admissions process, from recruitment to application to acceptance to matriculation.

One point raised by one interviewee was simply, “*We can’t assume that students even want these colleges.*” The right school for one student might be a selective liberal arts college or state flagship, but for many others it may not.

Inequities within the Admissions Recruitment Process

For the simple fact that selective college admissions offices don’t have the resources to reach every talented student in every small town, low-income high-achieving rural students miss out on the typical “touch points,” or points of contact, that their suburban and urban counterparts may find with selective colleges. Recruitment trips to rural regions of the country are costly, often unfruitful investments, and usually not as productive (in terms of number of students reached) as trips to schools with a history of sending students to selective colleges.

One officer described a recent trip to rural Appalachia:

The outreach that I was able to do in Appalachia, it took me two days, I had to stay with an alum because there were no hotels in the area, it was 150 miles [of driving] with very little cell service, [and] like one grocery store that I passed. I stayed with my alum, his wife, and the bear that comes when you leave the lid off the trash can. I went to two high schools in the whole time I was there. So, two days for two high schools and a CBO. That’s a lot of time, effort, money, everything. Not saying it wasn’t worth it, it was very helpful for my own education, but that’s something that we might be able to do once every ten years.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Officer #2.

Another officer described their recruitment efforts in rural Minnesota:

Most of us — [selective schools]—we always focused on the same schools, the same markets, and there's no innovation in the admissions process. There's been a lot more in the past few years I will certainly say, but [our office] found a box of files from the mid-80s, and it was focused on Minnesota and they had a recruitment plan there and we said, "Oh, what high schools are on that recruitment plan?" and it's the same high schools that we go to now. It wasn't anything different. That demonstrates to you that there are high schools that will never probably get an admissions officer from a selective school and there are high schools that get them over and over and over and it really speaks to the inequities in our educational process.⁸⁷

Individual admissions offices aren't necessarily to blame for this phenomenon. If a return-on-investment analysis shows that that admissions office would yield more students from a visit to a more populated area with schools producing a higher proportion of higher-achieving students, there's no reason not to travel to that area. Officers are often still able to reach diverse, underrepresented groups in urban areas, simply because of their proximity to CBOs or magnet programs that may be recruiting talented low-income students already. A trip to rural Appalachia may yield only a handful of students, if any.

Finding and recruiting rural students requires an institutional commitment to—and a significant resource investment in—geographic equity and the value of rural experiences on college campuses. While that may not have traditionally been within the scope of recruitment at selective colleges, that is rapidly changing.

Efforts Among Selective Colleges to Recruit Rural Students

How have admissions officers at selective four-year colleges made efforts to recruit and matriculate low-income high-achieving rural students?

Questions about offices' policies in recruiting rural students led to a rich array of responses and suggestions, many of which were echoed across offices. A list of concrete suggestions and recommendations can be found in the "Policy Recommendations" section

⁸⁷ Officer #1.

below. This section explores more fully the thoughts and experiences that officers and partners had in organizing effective rural outreach, in response to the question, “What strategies have you found effective in motivating prospective rural students both to apply and to matriculate at your school?”

Fundamental to understanding how to go about doing rural outreach is to approach this work with a better working definition of what “rural” actually means. Multiple interviewees discussed the “imperfect” nature of federal census distinctions and discussed more accurate ways of classifying and identifying rural context:

That is still really where most of our research is: is breaking apart some of these census definitions. US federal definitions are often imperfect, but they're a place to start. We're trying to develop a better mechanism at least for colleges and universities to assess what would make a student rural. We're doing that in a few capacities right now, both internally, but also on the [Coalition for College] rural working group.⁸⁸

One way that some colleges have amended that classification system is to remove one of the census’s classifications— “rural fringe”—from their outreach. The dataset described by this officer, composed of all rural high schools in every rural or small-town category except for rural fringe, has been shared out among both the Coalition for College and NACAC Rural and Small Towns working groups:

We mapped out all of the schools, and we felt like rural fringe was actually closer to metro areas and closer to being suburban or exurban than all of the other categories. We could certainly do all six, [...] it's just not a perfect system when you're looking at proximity to urban clusters. We said, “Let's go ahead and roll this out with five out of the six categories—we feel like the people who are in these communities are probably gonna say they identify as a rural or small-town area.”⁸⁹

Still, though, not all of the selective colleges I spoke to are as highly codified. For smaller schools with smaller applicant pools and fewer resources to expend in admissions, the recruitment process remains qualitative:

⁸⁸ Officer #1.

⁸⁹ Officer #1.

We are definitely not as codified as some of the other offices. There are a couple different metrics and trackers that can be used and we're not using any of that right now. Some of that is a reflection of the size of our pool compared to other institutions. [...] What we do is a manual process where we plot all the pins [representing applicants] on a map and then we start to look at the pins that aren't in major metro areas. So, our process is much more on the qualitative side than the quantitative side at this point.⁹⁰

This shared understanding of what rural means and where to find rural students is essential to more effective outreach. The sharing of practices and data through organizations like the Rural and Small Town working groups is an essential way of ensuring that rural students—like many other underrepresented groups of students—enter the pipeline to selective colleges:

I was at [selective school] for six years, and I asked “How do you look at geographic diversity?” [...] and they said, “Oh, we just Google Map it.” When you have ten thousand applications, that doesn't seem like a sustainable way to identify rural students or track them from an access perspective. [...] We can look at first-gen pipelines or students of color pipelines but if we're not able to identify or define this, we're not able to do that.⁹¹

The ability to better identify and track rural students enables many of the other strategies suggested by the officers and partners that I talked to. These strategies, or “touch points,” involve a range of media and mailing strategies. In the age of glossy pamphlets and social media marketing, it was especially surprising to hear across interviews that the most effective way of communicating with rural students is also the simplest: direct, personalized mail:

I think our strategy choices [were effective] particularly in thinking about the value of direct mail. Which is not sexy in 2019, but in thinking about rural students it has to be that simple. You have to actually put something in somebody's mailbox in western Colorado. You can't expect that they're going to be tapped into these other channels.⁹²

The type of mail sent is essential. One example from a partner organization highlighted the importance of a simpler letter over a glossy pamphlet, because of the direct and personal way that letter addressed students:

We tried a few years ago to do this glossy orange booklet that looks like a lot of college's view books. Everybody has their pretty book and we thought, “Oh, we need a pretty book.” We did a trial where we

⁹⁰ Officer #6.

⁹¹ Officer #1.

⁹² Officer #3.

*sent [the booklet] out [alongside] our standard mailing: a letter and a brochure. The students who received our standard mailing were more likely to start and complete their application than the students who got the pretty glossy book. In talking with students through different focus groups, I think the letter seemed more personal. We mentioned that we believe they have the potential, and we invited them to apply. It's a recognition of their hard work that is sometimes missed. They often don't hear that.*⁹³

Another “touch point” discussed was the relationship formed between admissions officers and high school counselors. In terms of building pipelines for rural students, this point is especially cogent. Pipelines for students from more urban contexts are often built from longstanding relationships with high school counselors, whose jobs entail closer relationships with students than college admissions officers. One officer described their office’s effort to build and grow their counselor database to capitalize on those longstanding relationships:

*We've taken the recruitment approach [...] in making sure that when we send out an email to our high school counselors and CBOs it is inclusive of rural counselors, that they see that their students as a priority by the institution as well. When I walked in, we had literally hundreds of high school counselors in our database and I said, “We need to change this.” High school counselors are there for the long haul. Communication with students changes every single year [for us] but high school counselors are there for sometimes decades. If they have a good feeling or think that their students belong at a place like [selective college] and you can convince them early on in their career, they might be your friend for the rest of their career. And so, we went from hundreds to now about forty-five thousand high school counselors in our database. Of those forty-five thousand, about five thousand are coming from federally designated rural and small-town schools.*⁹⁴

Those counselor relationships can open doors to more effective collaboration across selective schools, too. Another officer described their office’s recruitment strategy in rural New Mexico, and about how collaborative visit efforts led to more effective visits to rural parts of the country:

The most successful [partnership] that I've seen is in the Farmington, Four Corners, Navajo Nation, that part of the country. [...] We partnered with a local non-profit in that area to bring as many representatives as possible to the four corners region, about a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Albuquerque. If you're doing an evening program with a case study and a college access night with fifteen college representatives, the total amount of man hours is quite a bit. We have it going about every other year now, which is one way to pitch it to admissions offices: that you're not having to invest in this every single year. We can be more strategic, we don't only invite seniors, we're trying to get kids involved earlier, we're talking as early as

⁹³ Partner #1.

⁹⁴ Officer #1.

*high school freshmen. That I think has really helped in that area. We've seen since 2014 about a 220% increase in students within 100 miles of that zip code.*⁹⁵

This response demonstrates that these partnerships aren't limited to high school counselors, either. They could include rural CBOs, non-profit organizations, or, as another partner organization mentioned, libraries. The small-town library network is extensive, and already provides an essential service for small town students: internet access. Small town libraries are in the unique position to galvanize students to think about selective colleges, and in this partner's conversations with the Small Town Libraries Association, college and career planning has already become part of the function of small town libraries in many places.⁹⁶

A few officers mentioned an admissions ambassador program, in which current students recruit in their home communities. Some described their admissions ambassador program as simply another thing that the office did, and that rural student ambassadors often reported hosting ambassador events where no students arrived. One office in particular, however, described a robust, data-driven admissions ambassador program that has led to significantly more outreach in rural areas:

*The ambassador program does an amazing job of expanding our reach. The scale of what we do with the ambassador program is unlike any of our peers. There are plenty of schools who encourage students, "Hey, go back to your home high school and pick up some materials on your way home," but [...] no one I think is even in the triple digits in terms of the schools they reach. We reached 850 schools in 49 states last year. [...] That strategy in particular has really helped raise the numbers of volunteers from areas we wouldn't otherwise ever send an admissions officer. It's a great resource. Ambassadors now visit more high schools in a given year than admissions officers do, by a few hundred. It gets us to places where an admissions officer would never go, and then there's also places where admissions officers can do different kinds of travel when they're there because we know that we'll have ambassadors doing visits.*⁹⁷

This effort comes with the caveat that a significant donor has made the compensation of all of these ambassadors possible. But there are aspects of the program that may be useful across

⁹⁵ Officer #5.

⁹⁶ Partner #3, Interview, February 1, 2019.

⁹⁷ Officer #3.

selective colleges. For one, this office’s ambassador program relies on census tract data as a proxy for income level alongside standardized test data in order to identify low-income high-achieving students. That measure allows the office to make school assignments with the highest number of low-income high-achievers, where a student ambassador is most likely to encounter the highest number of target students. Moreover, this program emphasizes the value of a positive experience for ambassadors themselves. Ambassadors who get the chance to talk about their school in their home communities report a positive personal experience and are more likely to return. Echoing the personal component of direct mail mentioned above, this initiative also highlights personal aspects of the potential ambassadors:

One of the things we have done [was] this little strategy shift where we started emailing current students from more remote states with the message: “Franklin, [selective school] needs you in Colorado.” Kids in Connecticut don’t get that message. [...] It’s helped build that pride and excitement in students from these areas.⁹⁸

These are a few of many different rural “touch points” that came up in these interviews. Many others were mentioned, including adding rural and small town students to the college’s fly-in recruitment program, establishing direct lines of communication with rural parents and families, highlighting rural students’ experiences in admissions media, coaching students through the application and financial aid processes, and attending non-conventional gatherings of potential students like Future Farmers of America conventions or Governor’s Schools.⁹⁹

Another unconventional strategy involved recognizing the intersection between low-income high-achieving rural students and community college students:

We have a lot of students that because they’re rural are not willing to spend what a small private liberal arts or selective school would cost, so they’re spending two years at a community college. Most of these selective schools are not taking in large transfer classes and if they are, they’re not typically taking many

⁹⁸ Officer #3.

⁹⁹ The officer who mentioned visiting both the FFA convention and Governor’s Schools found much more success visiting Governor’s Schools than FFA meetings, simply because of FFA’s ambivalence towards elite higher education.

community college students. So that's one thing that we've done is trying to allocate about a quarter of a million dollars to need-based financial aid for a year specifically for community college students.¹⁰⁰

In lieu of purchasing names from testing agencies as the admissions office would do normally for a high school student, this officer recommended looking to the two-year Phi Theta Kappa honor society as a proxy for community college achievement:

When colleges are looking at high school students, they buy their name from the [College Board], but there's no equivalent for community college kids. Phi Theta Kappa has emerged as kind of a community college name purchasing system. So that's one way that we've really started to reach out to a lot of these students.¹⁰¹

There are many individual strategies that a selective college admissions office could choose to adopt. But something that emerged early on in these interviews, which was then adapted into the semi-structured interview script, was the “grassroots” nature of the movement to recruit and matriculate rural and small town students:

It's interesting to me to get into this and see that all these schools are doing their own grassroots stuff. I think that it'll be good especially with this [Coalition] working group to be like yeah, [selective school] does have this database, let's all use it in our reading process and things like that. But I think that everyone up until this point has been like, “We're interested in this area, this is what we're gonna do.” [...] It's just funny how grassroots it has been, because all these offices have somebody who's working on rural stuff, in an official or unofficial capacity, but no one has asked, “Hey, in the same way that we all have parts of websites for international students, or for first-gen students, why don't we have a page for rural students, or why aren't we sending these types of mailings?”¹⁰²

What is compelling about this effort is precisely how new it is. As mentioned here, this movement began with a few individuals “working on rural stuff,” and has grown into a cross-institutional conversation about rural and small town students and their unique challenges in the college admissions process. As discussed in multiple interviews, the policies of any one individual office are not what will make a systematic difference, but rather the sharing of information across offices and the network between admissions offices, high schools, and third-

¹⁰⁰ Officer #5.

¹⁰¹ Officer #5.

¹⁰² Officer #2.

party partners. This is an all-hands-on-deck, raise-all-boats approach to bridging the gap for low-income, high-achieving students, regardless of the actual college they may choose to matriculate at:

I envision us as being sort of an advocate for rural students in terms of making systemic change. So that might be coming up with like a list of best-practices in recruitment, admissions, and enrollment that can be sent out to the vice presidents and deans who probably have very little in the way of knowing what kind of challenges rural students are facing so that we can sort of say based on our research, based on what our membership is telling us, these are things you could be doing.¹⁰³

Important, too, is that these efforts operate independently of individual colleges:

My goal in outreach has always been, “Alright, maybe you’re a student who would have gone to UW-Whitewater. Let’s open up your eyes and your options and get you to UW-Madison.” If that success happens, that’s amazing, because you got a kid out of that town to do something outside of what they thought was possible. For me, it’s not about [selective school], it’s about the idea that you can leave your community and you can leave your state, even if it’s just over the border to the next state, and there are other opportunities available to you.¹⁰⁴

For that reason, one officer suggested a nomination process by which a student identified by their guidance counselor as a potential candidate for a selective school might be able to opt-in to information from a broader swath of selective schools:

What I would love to do is have a nomination process for opt-in selective schools, and basically say, “Okay, let’s identify who these selective schools really want: typically top 10% of their class, typically students who are intellectually curious. Your high school might have just two students that fit that bill this year, but if I as a high school counselor nominate a student as a potential scholar at a selective school and this nomination went to ten schools that opted in, we could all send that student information about under-matching, about financial aid, about what it’s like to be at a selective school so that they don’t have to just join the mailing list at [selective school] because their counselor heard that [selective school] is a good place for them, they could do this at ten different schools.”¹⁰⁵

As this transition happens in the movement to recruit rural students from a grassroots cause to a more systemic network of advocates, collective organizations like the Coalition for

¹⁰³ Officer #1.

¹⁰⁴ Officer #2.

¹⁰⁵ Officer #1.

College Access and the National Association of College Admissions Counselors are essential.

The purpose of the Coalition, for example, goes far beyond the application itself:

The real opportunity with the Coalition isn't with the application. [...] What the Coalition provides is opportunities for colleges with similar resources, with similar missions and similar goals to get together, share data, look at best practices, and implement some significant change.¹⁰⁶

Rural Students Through Evaluation and Matriculation

How are rural perspectives considered and evaluated through the admissions process, and what unique supports might rural students receive to encourage their matriculation?

In the admissions pipeline, if a low-income high-achieving student has actually made the decision to apply to a selective school, they must still be accepted and choose to matriculate at that school. This section explores those last two steps in the trajectory from prospect to matriculated student—about how rural students are seen through the evaluation process and whether or not they accept their offer once admitted.

As is the case with any applicant to a selective school, their application is viewed holistically: in the full context of their school, family, and community. The College Board's new Environmental Context Dashboard aids a selective admissions office's ability to see, at a glance, a holistic picture of the place that a student comes from.¹⁰⁷ Still, multiple officers detailed evaluation criteria specific to rural students in terms of the kind of rigor to expect from their coursework and the types of extracurricular activities unique to rural students:

It's making sure that we have a good understanding of the classes that are available to them. Sometimes they have a full curriculum of AP classes they can take, but often they only have four or five classes through the local university or through an online program and that's it. It's making sure that we as readers are really digging into those curricular options and trying to suss out what other intellectual pursuits the student is following. Just to make sure that we have an understanding of the ways in which it is unfair to compare this applicant to a highly resourced student and also what are the ways we can advocate for a student if they have sought out particularly interesting opportunities despite their lack of resources.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Officer #5.

¹⁰⁷ Jaschik, Scott. "Measuring Adversity." *Inside Higher Ed*, February 28, 2017.

¹⁰⁸ Officer #6.

On the extracurricular side of things, these considerations may include activities that an admissions officer may be unfamiliar with in reading an applicant from an urban or suburban area of the country:

For some students, farming or hunting or other sort of things you wouldn't find in an urban or suburban student's portfolio tend to come through. But for other students that's not part of their lives at all. [It's important that] we're not treating rural students as a monolithic group and really understanding what they do the same way we do any other applicant.¹⁰⁹

This last point is important: that rural students can't be evaluated as a homogenous group, either. Not all students will come from farming or ranching families, many will be of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, some may even be native students coming from reservation lands. Another aspect of the evaluation process includes the student's relationship with their rural upbringing. In thinking about contextual factors, admissions officers hope to accept a class that is representative of their respective home environments, rather than students that are hoping to shed that identity in coming to college:

I think whenever a student either directly or indirectly conveys that they as a seventeen-year-old have internalized the ethos of the place that they have grown up in—that gets us excited that that experience could be represented on our campus. There's a relatively straightforward sense in which we are affirmative for students from all kinds of different backgrounds, rural backgrounds being one of them, where we can say, "This student is going to bring with them something really valuable." It's one of the reasons why it's easier for me to advocate for a student in our selection process who is ready to leave their home area but is not presenting themselves and their relation to that area as, "Get me the hell out of here." Those students, if your attitude towards where you live is "Here's all the reasons why this place is awful. Here's why I need to get out of here." It's harder for me to say, "Your experience in that place is going to contribute to our campus."¹¹⁰

The issue, then, that I pursued was the extent to which rurality, or geographic context more generally, has become an affirmative identity of its own. While no one I talked to described rurality in the same category as traditional affirmative identities, many described rurality as a

¹⁰⁹ Officer #6.

¹¹⁰ Officer #3.

“plus factor,” an aspect of a student’s profile that could allow officers to “put a thumb on the scale” for a particular student, as described by Bowen et al.¹¹¹

To an extent I think that it should be, perhaps not on the same level as underrepresented minority students, but certainly I think it should be at the level of socioeconomic diversity, or first generation to college diversity. Institutions all have their own institutional priorities, preferences, needs, and there’s usually a—sometimes spoken, sometimes unspoken—hierarchy of “What do we absolutely need in our class?” v. “What would be great if we had in our class?” [...] You could make an argument that legacy and recruited athletics is actually taking many more spots away from the unhooked rural student. In my mind, if I was a vice president, if I was dean, I would certainly make it a preference for the institution and ensuring that we were acting as affirmatively as we can, given the selectivity of our institution—knowing that it’s probably not going to rise to the level of deep institutional priorities but certainly it should be a plus factor.¹¹²

Certain qualities in a rural applicant make some officers more likely to put the thumb on the scale, as well. Many officers are playing a game of hypotheticals, trying to anticipate which students are likely to succeed if they come:

The problem we encounter has a lot to do with yield and what will make a student be successful at [selective school] and successfully leave home and overcome that hurdle of fear. A lot of the common threads have to do with that fear factor. [...] They on their own have cleared a major hurdle just getting into our pool and being willing to apply. But we ask, “Who’s going to be the most successful? Who are we going to be most likely to yield? Who’s going to do well here?” Some of those indicators: First, supportive family, family that comes up in the application as “They pushed me, they want me to seek out these opportunities, they’re always there for me,” that kind of stuff. Second, leaving home before. This is a huge indicator for us. If they’ve done something like boys or girls state, or the governor’s scholar program, [...]. If they have done some kind of other college program somewhere, even if it’s in their home state but they’re staying outside of their town, out of their parents’ home for a significant period of time, if they’ve done any kind of international travel [...]. Students that seek out those opportunities to leave home tend to be the ones that are willing to make the jump to a school like [ours], are willing to leave home, and that are more successful in our process.¹¹³

The calculus of choosing whether or not to accept a rural student at least partially on the basis of whether or not they would matriculate highlights another tension identified across interviews: whether the real bottleneck in getting low-income high-achieving students to a selective college lies at the application, evaluation, or matriculation steps. Addressing the

¹¹¹ Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*. 178.

¹¹² Officer #1.

¹¹³ Officer #2.

evaluation step in the pipeline is fairly straightforward: choosing to accept a rural student must be a part of the institutional commitment of the admissions office. But whether the real obstacles lie in application or matriculation varies greatly by school type and context. A more complete answer to this question would require a greater sample of schools and applicants.

At a private liberal arts college with a lot of name recognition, the matriculation step may be less of an obstacle than applying. One officer from a private liberal arts college with significant name recognition responded:

By the time someone has applied, I think they've mentally taken the biggest leap that they need to take. Which is to say that particularly in the content of the applications that I read from rural students, I don't pick up on a lot of anxiety or concern about leaving a rural environment, leaving home, going far away.¹¹⁴

Still, another officer from a college with a similar profile, had a different take. They believed that plenty of rural students were already applying and instead attributed the “fear factor” of leaving their rural environment as the most important hurdle.

We don't have a problem getting rural students to apply to [selective school]. Sure, we want to do more outreach, we want to have more in our pool, we're never gonna say no. Especially if they're strong academic students from rural areas. But we don't consider the biggest issue having them in the pool.¹¹⁵

A state flagship institution may have a stronger ability to yield rural students, but only from its own state:

I'd say that the biggest hurdle is getting the students to apply. Once we've gotten them to apply, and if we've got them admitted, I would say eight times out of ten a student from [our state] that's admitted is going to be coming.¹¹⁶

Among smaller liberal arts institutions, these dynamics become more complicated. Many small liberal arts schools are in rural parts of the country themselves, which could be an

¹¹⁴ Officer #3.

¹¹⁵ Officer #2.

¹¹⁶ Officer #4.

incentive for a rural student that values a community similar to their own, or a drawback for a rural student hoping to leave their community for a more urban part of the country:

Even then, once they're in the pool, the fear factor of going away from home is really tough. We don't have as much of that because for many of our students we at least have the appearance of being closer to home. Many of our students do drive in and out so it might be a six-, seven-hour drive as opposed to a twelve-hour travel day with connecting flights.¹¹⁷

While this question may differ greatly across institutions, it is one worth considering within each college's individual context in thinking about where to allocate resources. If many rural students are already applying, what could this college do to draw more admitted students, such as virtual tours or fly-in programs? If not enough students are entering the pool in the first place, where might an in-person visit be most effective, or what kinds of direct mail might have the biggest impact?

Strategies aimed at matriculating rural students ranged from financial aid workshops to fly-in programs to working with rural families. One officer highlighted two possible solutions: focusing on the visibility of rural students and building relationships with rural families:

I'd like to do two things: one is create either a website or mailing that highlights the rural students and faculty we have on campus: where they're from, what they've done, what they're majoring in, some of their extracurriculars, how they've gone back to their homes and done things there, that kind of stuff that we can direct people to. And two: I would like for our admissions officers to reach out to the parents in this case. We don't typically email parents, but after students are admitted, I've found that if we send an email and say "Hey, congratulations on your student's acceptance, typically we let the student take a lot of ownership in this process, but that said, I'm your student's admissions officer and if you have any questions about potential majors, or cost, or financial aid, please feel free to reach out."¹¹⁸

Though on-campus experiences were mostly outside of the scope of what I explored in these conversations, I did speak briefly with a few officers about their campus's transition and on-campus support programming. The most prominent example of these efforts is the Small Towns at Swarthmore program at Swarthmore College, which addresses the issue of rural

¹¹⁷ Officer #5.

¹¹⁸ Officer #2.

visibility. Rural and small town students can find a separate webpage on the Swarthmore admissions website relevant to their experience and find support from both the admissions office and their rural peers at Swarthmore to encourage their application, matriculation, and transition into the Swarthmore environment. More often, programming for rural students is wrapped into other low-income or first-gen transition programming. While these other programs address similar types of issues, highlighting rural experiences and creating peer groups of rural students may be valuable both for the students themselves and in creating advisory groups for admissions offices interested in what they could be doing for rural students.

Much of this conversation is happening in real time in the context of collaborative working groups and special interest groups, as mentioned before, through the Coalition for College Access and the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC). The NACAC special interest group is now meeting on a monthly basis, and new innovations and best practices for working with rural students are being generated all the time.

I have synthesized my findings into concrete policy recommendations below.

Policy Recommendations

In order to increase access for low-income, high-achieving rural students at selective colleges, college admissions officers should consider the following recommendations:

1. Expand recruitment outreach to include rural parts of the country.

Recruitment outreach in rural areas is costly, in terms of travel expense and the lower return-on-investment of speaking to fewer schools and fewer viable candidates for admission. Nevertheless, the resources to enable more effective rural recruitment travel are rapidly increasing. New working groups through the Coalition for College Access and National Association of College Admissions Counselors have provided a platform for the sharing of ideas and data between college admissions counselors, guidance counselors, CBO partners, and many others. These working groups, along with the Rural Students Access Network Facebook page, are all easily accessible networks to tap into. Creating a shared “opt-in” program for talented rural students, that connects students to a range of selective colleges, would increase the array of options visible to them and increase their likelihood of applying to a selective college.¹¹⁹

Within these working groups, facilitators should look more towards state flagship institutions and local rural partners, who are more familiar with the kind of outreach that works well with the rural students in their regional context. Facilitators should also work (as they are) towards working definitions of “rurality” that more accurately capture the environmental context of rural schools than basic federal census definitions are able to delineate. Most importantly, working group members should take the “raise all boats” mentality towards their recruitment

¹¹⁹ This idea echoes the function of the ECO project, from Hoxby and Turner.

process, and focus on collaborating with other institutions on workshops and college visits, both virtual and in-person.¹²⁰

As is already common in urban and suburban high schools, admissions officers must seek to cultivate longstanding relationships in rural communities. Expanding lists of known guidance counselors in rural schools and locating rural CBO partners where they exist can better link selective admissions officers to prospective students and help their college to seem less foreign to a low-income rural student that may be less familiar with schools outside of their immediate vicinity.

Lastly, though difficult without the necessary funding, selective colleges should think more critically about how their admissions ambassador program may be able to expand their reach further than their established team of officers is able to. Current students have an established relationship with their home community, demonstrate to prospective students the possibilities available to them at a selective college, and don't require as much of a resource investment because these students are traveling to their home communities anyway. With better data, admissions ambassadors can be assigned additional nearby schools with high proportions of low-income high-achieving students and can begin to make in-roads into rural schools beyond just their hometown high school.

2. Establish an institutional priority for rural students through evaluation and selection.

Whether or not geographic context or “rurality” can be considered an affirmative identity, admissions officers must be advocates for low-income rural students through the admissions process. While being rural surely should not overshadow racial or ethnic identities, rurality

¹²⁰ Peggy Jenkins at Palhouse Pathways in Idaho has proposed a Geographic Information Systems tool that could identify “Centers of Gravity” for rural students, a resource for admissions officers doing recruitment travel to identify where to travel in different regions of the country to be able to access the highest number of prospective students.

should be considered a “plus-factor”: a unique, intersectional aspect of a student’s identity that merits representation in its own right.

Advocating for rural students in the admissions process requires a shared institutional understanding of the sorts of things to expect from a rural application: extracurriculars like 4-H and FFA, courses taken at a local college, or an emphasis on their rural community. Low-income rural students will likely lack the resources to produce highly polished admissions essays, pay for standardized test preparation, or to complete financial aid documents.

Further, geographic context must be integrated into the idea of a “holistic” admissions process. Low-income students are representative not only of their socioeconomic class or their race, but also of the place they are rooted in. Tools like the College Board’s Environmental Context Dashboard enable admissions officers to get a holistic picture of the applicant in context: the size of town they’re from, typical standardized test scores in their area, and the proportion of students on Free and Reduced Lunch. Short of actually visiting the schools themselves, the dashboard expands the scope of identities recognized through the holistic process.

Most importantly, admissions officers must recognize that rural students are a heterogenous group of students and that, while they may share experiences, they come from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. Not all rural students will be white, not all rural students will be farmers, and their rural perspectives must be situated in the context of their whole applications.

3. Provide rural-specific programming throughout the admissions process.

Ultimately, low-income rural students must be able to see themselves in the community of a selective college. Admissions offices should invest in rural programming before, during, and after the admissions process that is inclusive of rural students.

Swarthmore is unique in the immediacy of its rural-specific content, especially online. Other offices should look towards crafting online content that highlights rural experiences on campus and provides basic day-to-day insights into the lives of rural college students. Officers should also consider crafting rural-specific financial aid workshops that account for unique aspects of a rural student's financial background. Still, admissions officers should not overlook the value of personalized, direct mail outreach. Direct mailings that focus less on flash and more on clear information and personal validation of individual rural students are likely to yield more interest from students that otherwise might not know what to make of a letter from an unfamiliar institution.

In working with prospective applicants, admissions officers should consider incorporating rural students into their institution's fly-in program and communicating with rural parents directly. These two practices may help in overcoming the cultural barriers that would otherwise dissuade a rural student from applying or matriculating at that college—allowing them to picture themselves in the context of a selective college and encouraging their family to get their questions and concerns answered.

The work of recruiting rural students does not have to begin in students' senior year, either. The University of Chicago recently unveiled their "Emerging Rural Leaders" summer program, a fully-funded opportunity for high school freshmen and juniors to come to campus, take classes, meet students from around the world, and bring leadership back to their home communities. Regardless of where they choose to apply in the future, early programming like what UChicago has spearheaded speaks to the "raise all boats" mentality of the grassroots movement to recruit rural talent, while prioritizing rural students' connections to their small towns.

Admissions officers are busy people, and rural students are only one variable of the access equation for selective colleges. Regardless, these recommendations in concert with each other will help to bridge college information gaps in rural areas, turn selective colleges from abstractions to realities for rural students, and enhance the meaning of diversity on selective college campuses.

Limitations

While the admissions officers and partners selected for this study speak for a variety of institutional contexts, they are ultimately limited to the extent of their available time and knowledge of the higher admissions network. I was also constrained in my search in that the first few months of the year are a particularly busy time for selective college admissions. Given more time, I think conversations with many more state flagship universities, in particular, could yield more fruitful suggestions for selective institutions. Most, if not all, of the interviewees spoken to prefaced their suggestions with the reminder that rural students have been part of state flagship institutions' missions for much longer.

Moreover, two other kinds of voices that are absent from the discussion I've presented here are those of rural community-based organizations and current rural students. While the geographic reach of rural CBOs is still relatively small at this point in time, the handful that do exist have been highly involved in the organization and function of working groups like the Coalition for College and NACAC Rural and Small Towns working groups. Their reflections and ideas about how to best serve their own students are an essential piece of the solution that I have simply been unable to get to in the context of this paper. Rural students that are already enrolled in selective colleges may also have thoughts and suggestions about how their admissions experience may inform their school's admissions practices. Swarthmore is unique in its cultivation of rural identities on campus, and I believe that as rural students at other selective schools begin to recognize and self-organize around that identity, they may be successful both in creating stronger rural communities on campus and in opening dialogues with admissions and other student-life administrators.

This paper is an entry point into the conversation, a documentation and analysis of a new phenomenon in higher admissions, and an invitation for further research into any and all of these topics.

Conclusion

It is my hope that stories like my own do not remain exceptions to the rule in college admissions. Low-income high-achieving rural students remain more likely than low-income urban or suburban students to undermatch when applying to and selecting a college to attend. Rural students are particularly hard to reach—by virtue of physical distance and the ingrained cultural *habitus* of the communities they hail from. Moreover, initiatives aimed at connecting low-income high-achieving students with the necessary resources to find a college that matches their abilities have largely ignored low-income rural students. Rural perspectives in higher education are important not just to “discover” rural America politically (as it pertains to working-class white Trump voters), but more importantly to encourage the ability of every talented rural student to pursue the kind of education they want, not just the education expected of them. Rural America is a complex, diverse place, and rural voices are America’s voices, too. These efforts undertaken by selective college admissions offices and partner organizations to better understand low-income high-achieving rural students must outlast the political moment. Continuing to document and spread innovations in rural recruitment increases the ability of all selective colleges to better represent and support rural students on their campuses.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Request Form Email

Subject: Request for Interview

Dear [interview subject],

My name is Franklin Eccher, and I am a senior at Yale College in the Education Studies Multidisciplinary Academic Program (MAP). I am conducting a study on selective college attainment for low-income, high-achieving rural students, and the role of selective college admissions officers in recruiting and matriculating rural talent. I'm especially interested in the problem of "undermatch": the tendency among low-income, high-achieving students (especially in rural areas) to matriculate at colleges with a selectivity and academic rigor lesser than the competitiveness of their application. I was given your contact information by [reference] at [reference's school] because of the initiative that your office has taken in recruiting and matriculating rural students and am reaching out to see if you may be interested in participating in a 30-minute interview.

I will not be seeking any identifying information about you or the corresponding college that your office works in. I am not seeking any information about the inner-workings of the committee process, but instead am interested more broadly in your contact with rural students and how your office may be able to help overcome the socioeconomic and sociocultural barriers faced by rural students.

I'm hoping that reflections from admissions officers like yourself may inform a kind of best practices document that I can circulate among the higher admissions network.

Would you be interested in participating, and would you be comfortable with me recording our interview?

Thank you in advance and I look forward to hearing from you!

Franklin Eccher

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Script

[Summarize current media coverage of rural students and selective colleges, describe the language of “discovering” rural students and the new value placed of rural perspectives.]

- Does that coverage resonate in any way with trends you’ve observed in your office?
- How do you interpret this narrative of selective colleges “discovering” rural students?

Does your office, in any way, treat geographic context as a demographic identifier?

- If so, when did your office begin implementing that identifier, and how did that initiative come about?
- How does your office define the boundaries of geographic context? What may or may not be considered “rural”?

Why focus on low-income, high-achieving rural students?

- What sort of unique perspectives or experiences do they bring to campus?

How, if at all, might you read or evaluate a qualified low-income student differently from a rural context as opposed to an urban context?

- Should rurality, or geographic context more generally, be its own affirmative identity?

What difficulties have you encountered in your experience recruiting and yielding low-income, high-achieving rural students?

- What have your experiences been like communicating with rural parents?
- How might these difficulties be similar or dissimilar to experiences you’ve had recruiting and yielding comparable students from an urban context?

What strategies have you found effective in motivating accepted low-income rural students to actually matriculate?

- How might these strategies differ from strategies aimed at yielding low-income urban students?
- Has your school implemented any kind of student ambassador program, and if so, has that program yielded more qualified applicants from rural areas?
- What resources or innovations do you think might be helpful to your office to better recruit and matriculate rural students?

Once matriculated, do you have any sense of rural students’ experiences on campus?

- What role, if any, does your office play in informing the necessary support systems for low-income rural students on campus?
- Who else on campus, if anyone, is charged with the focused responsibility to provide ongoing support for rural students?
 - o If that support does exist, does it extend beyond rural students’ first year on campus?
 - o Do similar supports exist for other communities on campus who may struggle to adjust to campus life?

Is there anything else I should know that I haven’t asked about? Who else would you recommend talking to, in your office or at other colleges?

*Appendix C: Consent Form***Yale University**

Verbal Consent Form
 Rural College Attainment Study
 HSC# 2000024499

Name of Researcher: Franklin Eccher

Contact information: (970) 270-6124, franklin.eccher@yale.edu

You are being asked to take part in a research study about what role selective college admissions may be able to play in recruiting and matriculating low-income, high-achieving rural students. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to learn about initiatives already underway in college admissions offices to overcome the problem of “undermatch”: the tendency among low-income, high-achieving students (especially in rural areas) to matriculate at colleges with a selectivity and academic rigor lesser than the competitiveness of their application.

What I will ask you to do: If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview. The interview will include questions about your job, and specifically what your experiences have been like working with rural students. The interview will take about 30 minutes to complete. With your permission, I would also like to tape-record the interview.

Risks and benefits:

I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than a possible loss of confidentiality. My questions will focus on the college admissions and related experiences for rural students in a broad sense and will not inquire into the nature of committee decision-making or the experiences of individual students. I am cognizant of the current atmosphere in selective college admissions in America (I mean here the Harvard Admissions lawsuit), and I in no way seek to scrutinize the decision-making process. I am happy to offer you the chance to review the results of my study.

The potential benefits to you are the opportunity to contribute to a compilation of reflections, best practices, and suggestions for other institutions of higher education to better understand the experiences and barriers faced by the talented low-income rural students in their pool. I look forward to sharing my findings among the higher admissions network, and hope that you may find my findings at other schools informative as well.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I make public I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you, or the identity of the college that you represent. Research records will be kept on-hand in a password-protected file; only I, the researcher, will have access to the records. The responsibility

for any research oversight is mine. If I record the interview, I will destroy the recording after it has been transcribed, which I anticipate will be within two months of its taping.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have any questions, you can ask me in person, or contact me via my phone, (970) 270-6124, or email, franklin.eccher@yale.edu. If you have any questions about my research, you can contact the Yale University Human Subjects Committee, PO Box 208010, New Haven, CT 06520-8010, (203) 785-4688, human.subjects@yale.edu. Additional information is available at <http://www.yale.edu/hrpp/participants/index.html>.

Do you agree to participate in this interview? May I audiotape our interview?