

Original Paper

Transition and Participation of Rural Students in Higher Education: Barriers and Opportunities

Benard O Nyatuka^{1*}

¹ Department of Educational Foundations, Kisii University, Kisii, Kenya

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Abstract

There is an accumulating body of knowledge that points to the fact that rurality is a crucial demographic to be considered in the identification of students with respect to access to and retention in the higher institutions of learning. Research shows that rural economies, for instance, help shape students' career aspirations and labour options in these institutions. Among others, some students may find it difficult to make a decision on whether to go back to their hometowns instead of pursuing their dreams elsewhere in the community once they graduate from the higher institutions of learning. Students from rural areas are generally perceived to have low educational aspirations and achievement. Indeed, most of the studies concerning rural students tend to be tilted towards their educational and career choices. Interestingly, despite policy makers across the various sectors of the economy increasingly paying attention to the rural population, little focus has been directed towards transition, experiences and or participation of students from the rural communities in higher education. Against this background, this theoretical paper explores the barriers as well as opportunities regarding transition and participation of rural students, with a view to enhancing provision of meaningful higher education, including realization of the envisaged goals of this cycle of learning.

Keywords

barrier, higher education, opportunity, participation, recruitment, rural, transition

1. Introduction

More than ever before, attention is now being paid to students from rural areas due to their potential value to both colleges and universities. Koricich (2019) and Stone (2017) argue that it is important for institutions that value inclusiveness, equity as well as access to reach out to rural schools for purposes of recruiting students to higher education. For recruiters who are already doing this, there are immense benefits to be reaped, including enhanced diversity in the classroom, student enrichment and substantial

economic returns to the local community (Cole, 2019). Indeed, rural communities as well as their residents are known to be crucial members of society and national economies (Maltzan, 2006). This calls for the need to ensure that opportunities to equitable and accessible postsecondary education are provided.

But colleges and universities often get it wrong with respect to recruiting prospective rural students. Nevertheless, this can be rectified if they appreciate the fact that rurality is different everywhere (Seltzer, 2018; Mogollon & Solano, 2011). Particularly, admissions officers should take into account the types or unique circumstances of the rural students that they wish to recruit. For instance, students may not model their careers on businesses that are not locally available. Some students may also lack money to make applications to college or standardized tests. Similarly, some students may not be familiar with college campuses, including the norms, attitudes and even food (Koricich, 2019). Thus, other than the various colleges and universities, families and communities are important in preparing children for such institutions.

As their marketing strategy, a number of universities aspiring to enhance international student enrolment usually seem to pay attention to new countries or regions (Cole, 2019), with rural areas normally being overlooked. This has been attributed to the underlying culture and socio-economic background of the rural students. Gettinger (2019) argues that people in very rural areas are twice as likely to feel powerless and marginalized compared to those in cities and suburbs. Accordingly, the less education they have, the more alienated they feel (Stone, 2017).

The trend, however, is now focusing on new demographics as well as niches. This includes rural students who are largely an untapped market to date. Koricich (2019) observes that recruiters have a tendency of ignoring rural students since it is less cost-effective compared to seeking to admit large, urban high school students. This is echoed by Gettinger (2019) who observes that since rural households have lower incomes compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, rural students are considered to be less profitable for colleges. In many instances, the colleges are often compelled to extend financial aid to such students, a scenario that these institutions want to avoid.

It is instructive to note that worldwide, there are more than 3.4 billion people living in either rural or remote areas (Cole, 2019). This presents a great opportunity for those recruiters who wish to reach new audiences. Indeed, it is now much easier to make such a move owing to the various technological, social as well as economic reasons that have made it possible to bring about desirable change, unlike in the past few decades. For example, the exponential growth of online education has opened great opportunities for the rural students, including doing their degree without having to leave their community.

As per Seltzer (2018) as well as Maltzan (2006), there is a belief or perception that rural areas are ignored by decision makers. Furthermore, rural areas have unique values as well as lifestyles that are often grossly misunderstood. Due to this, such areas usually fail to get their deserved share of services or resources, including education. Koricich (2019) observes that recruiters seldom visit smaller, rural

schools. And, for those who do, they tend to belong to the more access-oriented institutions. The public and major private universities hardly have a regular presence in the rural high schools. The implication is that many of such students never have the chance to meet college recruiters outside the nearby community colleges, regional universities and smaller private institutions. For non-traditional students in rural settings, it may be impossible to meet the admissions officers for this requires travelling to campus.

In the US, for example, a paltry 20 percent of the rural students aged over 25 hold a university degree (Cole, 2019). Many students prefer to be employed on full-time basis just after high school. Accordingly, this is more pronounced in families that are engaged in agriculture. Of those who proceed to university, many belong to the first generation in the family to pursue higher education. Thus, they often do not have adequate peer networks or role models to make reference to when considering career options (Maltzan, 2006). As per Koricich (2019), just 59 percent of the graduating rural high school students proceed to college in the fall as opposed to 67 percent in the suburban areas. Thus, this is a boon for recruiters who are set to enhance their online marketing formula targeting rural students, especially in the US.

Similarly, Hughes (2018) reports that students from rural communities in the US are less likely to attend college as opposed to their city and suburban peers. But even when they make it to college, such students hardly graduate at this level of education (Maltzan, 2006). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where about 60 percent of the population resides in rural areas, less than 10 percent of college-age students are studying in the higher learning institutions. For institutions that value inclusivity therefore, it is worth incurring the expense or demanding to be facilitated so as to reach out to rural students. It is instructive to note that as opposed to educational opportunity, academic ability is equally distributed among people in the society, hence the need to endeavor to provide education to all, irrespective of their place of birth, residence or any related consideration.

Seltzer (2018) advises that it is important for colleges and rural communities to collaborate in ways that are not only linked to recruiting students. Particularly, colleges need to be engaged in communities in a manner that is responsive to their needs. This way, the rural communities will see universities as partners in development, not merely to recruit children to college. Unless institutions are ready to facilitate recruitment in rural areas, Koricich (2019) asserts that they are not keen on serving as well as educating rural students. Among other things, such institutions should look for resources in order to supplement and boost rural student recruitment.

2. Method

The literature review fell within a framework of theoretical work relevant to the transition, barriers and experiences that influence participation of rural students in the higher institutions of learning. It also explored the opportunities that such students, institutions and other relevant stakeholders could exploit to enhance participation at this level of education. The literature reviewed included articles in scholarly

journals, theses and dissertations, related policy and legislative documents, books as well as internet-based sources. In the following section, barriers to participation of rural students in the higher institutions of learning are discussed.

3. Barriers to Participation of Rural Students in Higher Education

As per Maltzan (2006), rural economies are often under pressure to meet the educational needs of rural youth given the per capita income that is usually below the state as well as national averages. Among others, economic factors, family support, race and first generation student status have been established to be barriers affecting both enrollment and persistence of rural students in the higher institutions of learning. Hu (2003), Yan (2002), Young (2002) and Gibbs (2000) echo these sentiments. They hold that such students are less likely to enroll in the postsecondary institutions of education compared to their urban as well as suburban colleagues. And, of those enrolled, a bigger percentage of rural students pursue vocational subjects as opposed to either suburban or urban ones.

As first generation students, Schutz (2003) observes that rural students are twice marginalized as they lack knowledge regarding higher education. This situation is compounded by the fact that such students are unlikely to receive this knowledge from their rural families or communities. Furthermore, these negative effects are aggravated by the agricultural background or economy which may exacerbate the feelings of dissatisfaction and insecurity among the rural students. And, as per Beeson and Strange (2003) as well as Tharpe (1997), race affects both college enrollment and persistence among rural students. Among other things, racial bias erodes self-confidence as well as fragmenting rural cultures.

De Young (1994) found out that achievement scores for rural high school students were slightly lower compared to their counterparts in metropolitan America. Similarly, rural school dropouts were found to have lower chances of returning to school than those in cities. Yan (2002) established that those rural students who persisted in college came from the middle and high socio-economic backgrounds, and that they were more likely to be single men. Rural women students were found to have higher chances of dropping out than rural men. The study also revealed that rural students who dropped out were less likely to major in mathematics or science when compared to the persisting ones. This finding seems to be reinforced by Hsieh (2002) who found mathematics scores of suburban students to be higher than those of the rural students.

According to Musto (2019), Cole (2019) and Sonone (2018), affordability remains a key challenge that hampers recruitment of rural students to the higher institutions of learning. Maltzan (2006) and Gibbs (1998) aver that the glaring gap between rural as well as urban incomes may be the most formidable constraint to college attendance. While some students might lack the money for applications and tests, others may not afford tuition fees. In such cases therefore, scholarships, bursaries and flexible methods of learning can contribute greatly to the burden of seeking education at this cycle of learning as well as improving their communities.

Furthermore, some rural communities do not enjoy widespread and appropriate infrastructure,

including internet access. Seltzer (2018) advises that it should also be made more affordable for schools as well as individuals. And, although there are smartphones, many students do not have cellphone at home. On their part, both teachers and students should acquire digital literacy and other skills required to use it well.

Similarly, rural schools often do not have counselors to share information, support and help create connections with families and communities. Coupled with lack of a local university or college nearby and few college peers, rural students may not be aware of what campus life is or have an idea of the attitude and behaviours to expect (Maltzan, 2006). Among others, such students may be nervous about doing something that is not familiar, or reluctant to make an application to college because of the misconceptions to do with it. Thus, institutions that establish sound partnerships with rural communities can go a long way towards reducing any dissonance concerning potential attendance.

As per Gettinger (2018), many rural parents are generally skeptical of higher education. Therefore, strengthening such connections means a lot to the underrepresented groups, including students who would be the first from their family to study at college level. It is important to note however, that school counselors in rural areas have an inhuman amount of responsibilities. These include scheduling, releasing buses, conducting special and emotional counseling as well as helping students sign up for tests. It is instructive to note however, that building partnerships with rural communities can't be done overnight. It is a multiyear engagement process that will not yield results for the first 3-5 years. Indeed, there is need to get into the communities and help change the perception of the universities in these areas.

Furthermore, Gettinger (2018) observes that it is not easy for rural students to visit colleges and universities to have first-hand experience or take part in sit-down interviews with admissions officers. Similarly, some students are never ready to leave home, family and the way of life that they know and cherish. Cole (2019) advises that for families and communities where fears of losing members and related perceptions are rife, it is necessary to use messaging that enhances not only awareness but also reduces cognitive dissonance to do with the negative impacts of students joining university. This way, schools can significantly boost reception of their marketing activities. Seltzer (2018) opines that not coming back might be the best thing for some students, and that it could be what some families want.

Similarly, Gettinger (2019) reports that both colleges and universities prefer to recruit at high schools where the average family income is high. This means that few recruiters are meeting with students who may need their help the most. Recruiters are also reported to disproportionately concentrate on private schools. This disadvantages rural areas since they hardly have wealthy families or private schools. Accordingly, this threatens the broader economy that relies heavily on the rural communities as well as workers. Fortunately, such institutions are increasingly considering rural student outreach as a deliberate part of their recruitment strategies. Particularly, international students from rural areas have become much more attractive to recruiters. Opportunities for participation of rural students in the higher education institutions are explored below.

4. Opportunities for Participation of Rural Students in Higher Education

Promotional messaging like extending scholarships to rural students, making it easy to apply and attend college, as socio-economic and cultural differences may apply can be very powerful. Providing greater post-secondary opportunities to such students is not simply a matter of equity or moral obligation but rather a matter of national prosperity (Cole, 2019). Indeed, one of the most appropriate means for colleges targeting rural students is to successfully penetrate markets. Having partnerships meant to help high school students familiarize themselves with post-secondary opinions and experiences, and apply to college is equally crucial. For example, Indiana University in the US has a planning night that involves rural high schools in far-flung parts of the state as well as partnering with school counselors (Seltzer, (2018).

Another way to connect rural students involves asking alumni to come and speak at, say, family nights about their college experiences (Seltzer, 2018). By utilizing their local alumni as part of their recruitment plan, higher institutions of learning can significantly reach out to rural students. Both Cole (2019) and Seltzer (2018) aver that providing opportunities to such alumni to meet potential students to respond to queries regarding their experiences can be a very effective recruitment tool. Similarly, building word of mouth and authenticity, especially in small communities is critical in achieving success. Also, making broader applications for their interests or connections to other fields of study can serve as another effective way to involve rural students.

There are many more good cases of institutions that have created initiatives meant for rural students. This includes VIT Bhopal University in India which gives scholarship programmes designed to promote advancement of rural students. Similarly, the University of Manitoba in Canada gives additional opportunities to students with rural backgrounds interested in their medical programme. As per Cole (2019), apart from extending more chances to students who would otherwise not be able to, classrooms are enriched by making them truly representative of society.

Elsewhere, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) in the US has an initiative to improve access, particularly for isolated students through sponsoring recruitment fairs showcasing large groups of colleges as well as universities. But for majority of the rural students, the cost of travelling is prohibitive (Cole, 2019). To address this challenge, the University of Georgia, for example, provides free chartered buses for students to attend information sessions. Some institutions also provide for on-campus activities during such events while others take care of commercial transportation costs (Koricich, 2019). Thus, apart from improving their outreach ventures, such institutions offer the much required service to the local communities, including sharing the burden of meeting the needs of children with their parents or guardians.

And, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the University of South Africa (UNISA) and UNICAF University, for instance, have made gigantic strides towards enhancing access to higher education through provision of a wide range of online programmes. It needs to be appreciated that as population bulges, such a mode of study not only improves access to education but also facilitates economic growth as well as

development of the rural communities that are involved (Cole, 2019).

Reports indicate that rural schools are often overlooked as opposed to more affluent, populated areas. This presents a good opportunity to those colleges that are willing to take up the challenge and travel a little further afield (Cole, 2019). It is worth noting that advocates of rural recruitment often reiterate the importance of diversity in such an exercise. Upon graduation, many of the students return to their communities, thereby occupying critical positions that are more often than not understaffed. Equally important is the need to introduce families to the idea that a college-educated person might be able to live in his or her home area but work elsewhere, that is, either remotely or by commuting. Seltzer (2018) advises that such families can as well be informed about jobs in their own communities that require college education that they are not aware of.

On their part, governments can support public higher education by fairly distributing the resources required by the institutions serving various communities (Koricich, 2019; Sonone, 2018). Individual institutions should also feel free to turn to philanthropy in order to raise extra funding to support the education of rural students. In particular, identifying and working closely with both current and potential donors with a rural background will go a long way in recruiting rural students and supporting them to complete their studies.

Research demonstrates that strong collaboration among families, the community and learning institutions enhances participation of students in their educational pursuits. It is also reported that such a partnership yields a variety of benefits to the parents, educators and community as well (Republic of Kenya, 2017; Neperville Community Unit School District, 2013; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). It is worth observing that such a move not only enhances the chances of learners to experience success in school but also later in life. Thus, a partnership involving the parents, community and higher institutions of learning is critical in the recruitment as well as participation, including completion of learning at this cycle of education.

Indeed, high degree of parental involvement in the education of children, especially in the rural areas has been found to enhance academic performance, positive attitudes towards the learning institution, completion rates as well as behaviour, among others (Xu & Filler, 2008). According to Malecki and Demaray (2006) as well as Epstein (2001), learning institutions stand to boost the academic achievement of students from low-income households if they have sound parental and community partnerships. There is evidence to show that although students from higher-income families seem to perform better in their academic endeavours, learners from all backgrounds gain once the parents become engaged (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). For these reasons, Chrispeels and Gonzalez (2006) strongly recommend that strong social connections involving institutions of learning and families be created.

It is worth noting that despite the benefits attributable to the family, community and higher education partnerships, such collaboration is often found to be weak (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). This scenario is usually associated with particular factors which frustrate the establishment of effective

parental and community engagement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). For instance, whereas the educators are required to lead the way, there are a variety of external social, cultural as well as economic factors that hinder the families and community from such participation. Getswicks (2010) attributes this to the pressures of contemporary life.

Particularly, learning institutions in rural settings do not readily welcome the involvement of the family and the community (Mogollon & Solano, 2011). Similarly, some teachers do not believe illiterate parents, and who do not have high expectations for their children's education have anything worth to offer in such a partnership. Furthermore, some parents and educators often believe that the learners may not appreciate or support their parents' involvement (Erlendsdottir, 2010; Richardson, 2009). Cultural differences are also reported to cause communication problems, particularly if the teachers rely on their own cultural interpretations as they interact with diverse groups of parents.

Similarly, the parents' own past unpleasant school experiences may influence the creation of a sound engagement with their children's teachers (Erlendsdottir, 2010; Richardson, 2009). Time as well as financial challenges hinder effective communication between the educators, parents and community (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Similarly, the parents' work schedules may conflict with the timing of such events, thereby making it impossible for the parents to attend them.

More importantly, educators should have positive attitudes and skills to develop constructive collaborations with the families as well as community as this is one of their professional obligations (Getswicks, 2010). Among others, a good grasp of parenting skills is crucial to establishing sound partnerships (Epstein et al., 2002). Clearly, there are all sorts of barriers that lead to ineffective family and community involvement. This explains the difference between rhetoric and reality with respect to family-community-higher education partnerships. Thus concerted efforts should be made by the concerned stakeholders to build strong partnerships so as to enhance participation of rural students in the higher institutions of learning.

5. Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions, it is clear that there are formidable barriers that both potential as well as registered rural students in the higher education institutions contend with. This requires that appropriate intervention measures always be put in place to address them with intent to enhance participation of rural students in these institutions.

To better prepare potential students for higher education, high schools need to have counselors or career guidance officers to share information and support to students as well as make connections with the parents as well as community. This will help them know about campus life, including the attitudes and behaviours to expect. On their part, universities need to make strong connections with rural communities to reduce any dissonance regarding potential attendance of rural students. This could be achieved through engagement in promotional messaging like offering scholarships and bursaries as well as making it easy to apply and attend campus.

Similarly, colleges and universities need to consider utilizing their local alumni as part of their recruitment plan. Deitrich (1999) found out that having siblings, relatives or friends who were attending or had attended university previously helped rural students in the transition from high school to postsecondary level. It is critical that all stakeholders have respect for rural students and the social benefits of an educated, engaged and inclusive society. It is equally important to adopt messaging that enhances awareness and reduces cognitive dissonance to do with the negative influences of students leaving for university. There is need also to distribute research about rural students to the various stakeholders, including college and university admission officers, teachers, parents and community.

Due to limited government funding in many universities, it is necessary to turn to philanthropy to raise support to rural students, including recruitment. Indeed, lack of resources with which to conduct, say, biology and chemistry experiments as well as funding for textbooks remain barriers to realizing meaningful education among a number of rural students (Maltzan, 2006; De Young, 1997). It is worth reiterating that governments need to increase their budgetary allocations to support public higher education, including fair distribution of the resources required by these institutions serving various communities.

Deliberate efforts should be made to educate parents on preparing children for colleges and universities, including being informed that a college- educated person might be able to live in his or her home region but work elsewhere, that is, either working remotely or commuting. It is worth noting that parental expectations have been found to be a key predictor of college attendance for rural students (Schutz, 2003; Yan, 2002). Maltzan (2006) and De Young (1994) hold that achievement in education among students remain low as fewer rural parents lay emphasis on higher education. This scenario has been linked to the small number of educated adults who are in the rural areas following their out-migration as youth to the higher learning institutions.

Combined effort is required to provide the physical infrastructure for colleges and universities or centers to offer online and in- person instruction. These centers may also offer occupational training in line with the needs of the local community as well as businesses. There is need to enhance internet access to rural communities that is affordable for both learning institutions and individuals, while teachers and students must acquire digital literacy and related skills required to use it.

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