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# Small Rural High Schools and College Completion

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## Introduction

Students in small rural high schools are an overlooked group of students in this country. The push for students to go to college seems to be common across the United States; however, that might not be the case for every group of students. Small rural high school students are a unique set of students when it comes to college because it is not always considered the biggest priority for these sets of households. The smaller rural high schools are majority filled with students of lower socioeconomic status (Hardre, & Reeve, 2003; Meendering, Kranz, Shafrath, & McCrmack, 2016). A lot of lower socioeconomic status students are first-generation college students, which are students that are the first in their family to go to college. These students could struggle with money, course loads, and the many adjustments that must occur when a student goes to college for the first time (McCullogh, 2016). That is something we must look at to make changes to support these students with their futures. It is not always about what makes students successful, but why might they fail or stop trying at what the world sees as a better future. It is important to see where these students go to see what or if any improvements can be made to help them succeed. Because it is becoming harder for someone without a college degree to succeed in today's society, these issues will need to be addressed.

For the purposes of this project, small rural high schools are defined as high schools that are located within a rural setting that consists of majority forest or farmland, and where there are less than 500 students per graduating class. The definition of college completion throughout this study is the degree obtainment of a student from a 4-year institution or university, excluding community colleges or career institutes.

## Literature Review

This literature review investigates previous scholarship on small rural high schools and college completion and forms links between the two. Current academic literature was analyzed from the past 10 years with a few from previous years for explanation and definition purposes. The use of articles that are current is to maintain and account for the economic environment of the United States. This will then account for the recession of 2008 and the growing rate of college tuition. These articles were determined based on their thematic relevance to small rural high schools and college completion. This literature review is organized under three themes: rural school students, first-generation college students, and college completion.

**Rural Schools and their Students**

Rural high schools are seen to be more connected and personal to their students due to the smaller size and nature of the school itself. The learning environment in these smaller settings can be very impactful. Pedder (2006) states that the sizes of a class are what influence the overall effectiveness of the students and teachers to give high-quality learning. Three different models were compared. These models looked at three different aspects of these classroom environments. The first model explored the quantity of learning opportunities. The second model looked at the quality of the learning opportunities. The third and final model evaluated the negative effects for students in different sized classes (Pedder, 2006, p. 224). The data from each model was obtained through observations of said classrooms and interviews from the teachers. With the larger class sizes, it was found that a lot of the time was spent on classroom management and non-academic interactions, and that students with low self-esteem became disengaged from classroom learning (Pedder 2006, p. 225). While in the smaller classrooms, students are able to interact with the teacher more individually, group work and the overall learning in the classroom

are more effective (Pedder 2006, p. 228). Based on these results, Pedder (2006) concluded that the biggest effects that the classroom size had on student learning were on the interaction, relationships, and voices of the students.

Another strength of schools within the smaller districts is they tend to have a better understanding and implementation of policies to help build a better environment which is personal and motivational to each student (Kweon, Ellis, Lee, & Jacobs, 2017; Meendering, et al., 2016). Meendering et al. (2016) gathered data on school wellness from 70 large, medium, and small school districts. The researchers determined these sizes through the average daily attendance size in secondary grade levels. They used a school wellness assessment tool to determine the strength and comprehensiveness of the schools' policies (Meendering, et al., 2016). They determined that the smaller school districts had stronger and more comprehensive policies for school wellness (Meendering, et al., 2016). The researchers concluded that smaller districts are able to write their policies that are more comprehensive with definitive language and closer to the standards than larger school districts (Meendering, et al., 2016).

However, the smaller rural high schools are majority filled with students whose families are from lower socioeconomic status (Hardre, & Reeve, 2003; Meendering, et al., 2016). According to Herman, Huffman, Anderson, and Golden (2013), these students have trouble getting accepted into college because they struggle to prepare for SAT and ACT exams due to the lack of funds for preparation courses and tutoring. Herman et al. (2013) gathered the scores for the 2009 SAT and ACT for North Carolina high school students broken down into three categories: agriculturally-intensive, rural, and socioeconomically distressed (p. 47). They used the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center's list of rural and urban counties to determine each county's classification. When looking at the SAT and ACT scores through the

lens of socioeconomic status, Herman et al. (2013) concluded that the lower the socioeconomic status of the student, the lower the score on the ACT and SAT (p. 47). They also found that rural students have significant score deficits on their entrance exams compared to their urban counterparts (Herman, Huffman, Anderson, & Golden, 2013, p. 47).

**First-Generation and Low-Income College Students**

College students from rural communities are less likely to have parents who attended college than their peers from suburban and urban areas (Byun, Irvin & Meece, 2012). These students will go through an experience that they are unfamiliar with and face several challenges because they have no direct support system to lean on for help because their family members have not been to college to gain that direct knowledge (Ishitani, 2006).

According to Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996), the majority of first-generation college students are those of low-income families. Those whose family income was $50,000 or higher were more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than those whose family income was $25,000 or less (Byun et al., 2012, p. 474). As explained by McCullogh (2016), they may have to get jobs, which could result in poor academic performance or withdrawal from college, or they get loans and if they still struggle financially and have to withdraw, they are left with significant debt and no college degree. According to the Pell Institute (2011), "46.8% of low-income first-generation students withdrew from college without completing a degree within 6 years, whereas 23.3% of the continuing-generation population withdrew prior to degree completion in the same timeframe" (as cited in McCulloh, 2016, p. 5). The national average for rural college student retention rate is 78% while the nonrural college student retention rate was 83% (Pell Institute, 2011, as cited in McCulloh, 2016, p. 5).

The support or feeling of support from the institution is important for a first-generation college student to succeed. These students will be dealing with academic transitions and challenges when they begin their post-secondary careers. (Ishitani, 2006; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). They will deal with the major increase in workload and the level of said work (Thomas, 2013). These students do not know how to make the transition mentally and academically from high school to the college level which will be a challenge that they will have to overcome (Thomas, 2013). According to Thomas (2013), if these students were not properly prepared in their courses from high school, then this will make the gap between secondary and the college level even more challenging. Thomas (2013) conducted a survey to measure five categories: classroom learning environment, perceived institutional support, academic self-efficacy, social support, and college completion intention. The survey showed that college completion was more likely for students who felt supported by their institution had social support through membership in clubs and fraternities or sororities. The researchers concluded that the environment of the college classroom and the connections that are formed by students to their teachers and classmates helped them succeed in the classroom and ultimately progress towards college completion (Thomas, 2013).

**College Completion**

Although financial challenges and first-generation status are among the challenges many rural high school graduates face in going to college, research indicates that college completion rates for rural students are equal to or slightly higher than for suburban and urban students (Byun et al., 2012). Byun et al. (2012) followed 25 students through high school, college, and into their mid-twenties. They viewed transcripts for each student from their institutions to analyze how each student performed. The researchers found that 7 out of 10 of the rural students who attended

a four-year institution after high school graduation had earned their bachelor's degree, which is similar to their urban counterparts (Byun et al., 2012). Another major finding in this study was the higher the rural student's first-year cumulative GPA the more likely they were to complete college (Byun et al., 2012, p. 474). The researchers concluded that rural students value a college education and see it as a way towards "economic prosperity due to declining employment opportunities in rural communities" (Byun et al., 2012, p. 479).

**Conclusion**

The challenges that graduates of small rural high schools go through in order to succeed in their post-secondary career are low socioeconomic status (Herman, Huffman, Anderson, & Golden, 2013), and being the first-generation to attend college in their family (Ishitani, 2006; Byun et al., 2012). Nevertheless, research also demonstrates that several characteristics of college students from small rural high schools enable them to persist and complete college. These include ongoing parental support and encouragement (Ishitani, 2006), and membership in social clubs and fraternities or sororities (Thomas, 2013). Research also suggests that unique aspects of the rural high school experience, such as small classes (Pedder, 2006), and better school policies (Meendering et al., 2016), give students a stronger foundation for post-secondary education.

Small rural high schools are a niche area in American educational research that needs more attention. There is not a lot of data-driven literature on this subject in terms of the college experience of these students. The research is still thin in regard to their completion of the said program. Educators throughout America speak the importance of going to college and getting a degree, but they do not speak about the pathway and obstacles that the students who listened and went to college had to overcome. The ability to help give these students more information on

expenses and preparation, both academically and mentally, about college would be beneficial for all of those involved. Looking at the differences in college completion over time will help provide an understanding or outlook into the results of rural education and their postsecondary careers. Knowing which subjects that the students believed to have been easy and/or difficult in high school versus college will help analyze how well rural students are prepared in those core subject areas. Further research will be able to help develop new standards or policies for both colleges and rural high schools to provide better experiences and programs for said students.

## Methods

The research question developed to guide this project was "What factors impact the decisions of graduates of small rural high schools regarding college attendance and degree completion?" To gather up data for analysis, I conducted a detailed online survey through Google Forms. To recruit participants who attended small rural high schools, I posted a link for my Google Forms survey to a Facebook group for a small rural county in Virginia. With this message, I requested users to forward the link to others they thought might be willing to participate. I shared the survey this way to recruit as many people as possible with experiences of different small district high schools and their college completion without knowing who the participants were. The online survey included an informed consent form as the opening page, where participants had to declare they were at least 18 years of age before gaining access to the survey questions.

The survey was constructed in a linked type format through Google Forms. It had questions that led to another question directly or a leading question that branched off the previous. This allowed the participants to only answer the questions which pertain to them. This helped with the time management of the survey to prevent the participants from leaving the

survey before completing and submitting it. The survey began from a large perspective dealing with general demographic information, like gender and race, and funneled down from graduating from a small rural high school to a narrowed focus about their college experience and completion. A complete list of survey questions is provided in the Appendix.

After the demographic questions, there were three main areas that my survey questions focused on: participants' high school experience, their knowledge and experience making the transition from one level to the next, and their college experience. The survey consisted of a few different types of questions. There were straightforward Yes/No questions. For example, "Did you graduate from a small rural high school?" or "Were you accepted into a four-year institution directly after high school?" Then there were descriptive questions to provide context and reasoning behind the participants' answers. Some examples of these questions are as follows: "In general, which classes did you find difficult during your time in high school? (Check all that apply)" or "How much on average was your family's annual income while you were enrolled in high school?" I also asked Likert-type questions with response scales of "strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree." An example of these questions is: "My high school and teachers encouraged me to attend college." This variety of question topics and formats within the survey provided the valuable data needed to understand the experiences from high school through their time at a four-year institution.

After two weeks, I had obtained responses from 42 participants and closed further participant access to the survey. The Google Forms platform provided percentage data on the responses to each question. I used this information to categorize the data on a spreadsheet for analysis. Using the spreadsheet, I looked at the data from those who completed high school which I then divided into two categories: those who completed college and those who did not.

These sections then helped separate the information from the surveys into subsections such as those who are first-generation college students, those where cost was a factor, etc.

## Results

Of the 42 participants who completed the survey, 73.8 percent were female and 21.4 percent were male while 2.1 percent classified themselves as "Other" or preferred not to say. In terms of race, the participants were heavily white with 83.3 percent. African American was the next largest group with 7.1 percent. The majority (51.2%) of survey participants were from low-income families at the time of their enrollment in high school with an average family income of 50,000 or less. The survey participants were enrolled in small rural high schools during a variety of time frames: 22 percent of participants were enrolled before 1980, 22 percent were enrolled between 1981 and 1990, 26.8 percent were enrolled between 1991-2000, and 29.3 percent were enrolled in 2001 to present.

The difficulty and level of preparation for college-level courses were different from one group of survey participants to another. Thomas (2013) stated that rural high school graduates deal with the major increase in workload and the level of said work once they transition to college. The survey supports this claim as 47.4 percent of survey participants said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement of "I had accurate understanding of the demands of college level work" while only 39.5 percent agreed or strongly agreed. In terms of which courses the survey participants struggled with the most, math was the most difficult course for them in high school with 51.2 percent and in college with 44.7 percent. The only core subject area that became more difficult at a college level than in high school for the participants was science as shown in Table 1. In high school, only 14.6 percent of participants felt that Science was a difficult course; however, in college, 34.2 percent of participants felt it was a difficult

course. This jump could be influenced by the workload that a science course requires in college versus in high school. A college-level science course has longer lectures, and separate and more detailed lab days. The other core subjects remained consistent in difficulty among the participants from high school to college despite being at the college level with an increased workload.

Table 1

*Difficult Courses in High School versus College*

| | Number of Participants who Found Courses Difficult | |
|---|---|---|
| Subject | High School | College |
| English | 5 | 6 |
| Math | 21 | 17 |
| Science | 6 | 13 |
| History | 6 | 6 |

The cost and financial factors of going to college are one of the leading causes of students having to withdraw from their college. Financial issues plague students and could result in dropping classes or withdrawing from college. McCullogh (2016) explained that students may have to get jobs, which could result in withdrawal from college which is supported through the survey participants. Of the survey participants that did not obtain their bachelor's degree, 50 percent stated that it was because of the high cost of attending college. Another 30 percent of those who did not obtain their degree stated that they stopped pursuing their degree because they needed to get a job. Both of these findings back McCullogh's (2016) statement because they are directly influenced by financial reasons or issues while in college. Another finding was that 30

percent of survey participants said that the distance between college and home was a factor in their leaving of college. This could be seen as a financial reason, because distance is a huge financial burden which is attributed to many factors like out-of-state tuition, traveling, etc.

Those survey participants who completed their bachelor's degree and those who did not have a lot of similarities as opposed to differences. The majority of both groups of participants all felt that they had adequate resources, were encouraged to go to college by their teachers, high school, friends, and family, and found English to be the easiest course in high school and college. Of the survey participants who completed their degree, 89 percent were accepted into college directly while enrolled in high school. Only 9 percent of those participants who earned their bachelor's degree did not get accepted into college until after they had graduated high school. This is drastically different than those who did not get their bachelor's degree. Of said participants, 50 percent had been accepted into college and 50 percent were not been accepted into college while they were enrolled in high school. This shows that the factors for acceptance into college while in high school have a correlation with the possibility of college completion. However, of those survey participants who did not get their bachelor's degree, all but one participant felt that they had adequate knowledge and an understanding of college-level work. This could show that an unexpected change in workload or level of work was not the main factor in the participants not obtaining their degree. This, therefore, supports the participants' answer that the high costs of college were their main factor for leaving college.

In analyzing the survey data, I noticed some differences between those who attended high school before 2001 and those who were enrolled in high school from 2001 to present day. This time period correlates to the period in which the No Child Left Behind regulations and standardized tests were implemented. Two of the key areas in which this group of participants

stand out is that of preparedness and college completion. Of the participants who were enrolled in high school from 2001 to present day, 42 percent did not feel that they had adequate knowledge of college and an understanding of college-level work. This is opposed to a total of 21 percent, who felt the same way, among all other decades. The participants who were in high school during the No Child Left Behind period felt less prepared and ready for college than before the start of said act. As shown in Table 2, of the survey participants that did not obtain their bachelor's degree 42 percent were enrolled in high school during the No Child Left Behind Act. This could show that the students who have been educated during the regulations of this act are not being adequately prepared and therefore are not finishing their degrees due to the level and workload of college work.

Table 2

*Bachelor's Degree Completion and Decade of High School Enrollment*

| Decade Enrolled in High School | Did Complete Degree | Did Not Complete Degree |
|---|---|---|
| Before 1980 | 8 | 1 |
| 1981 – 1990 | 7 | 2 |
| 1991 – 2000 | 8 | 2 |
| 2001 – Present Day | 7 | 5 |

## Conclusion

The data analysis showed that there were some limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the survey results. The survey consisted of a small number of participants recruited through one county's Facebook page. Although members of that Facebook group were asked to forward the survey to others, it is likely that the survey results came almost entirely

from residents of the same small rural county, and there were not any survey questions asking about participant location. Another limitation of this study is that the participants were asked about their family income while in high school; however, these participants were enrolled in high school over many decades, so the study does not count for inflation. Another survey revision that could have easily been made to enhance the data would have been to ask for ranking answers on the questions about the difficulty of courses in high school and college. Other limitations of this study are due to the fact that the college pathway is narrowly focused on four-year institutions and does not take into account community college, military, an interrupted college education, or if the participant is still in or planning to continue with college at a later date. These limitations are particularly relevant for low-income and first-generation college students (McCullogh, 2016).

However, the study's results raise questions for further research and analysis. The key area to continue gathering information is the No Child Left Behind generation of students. This area stood out in this study with the most dramatic shift in preparedness and completion among all of the time frames of high school enrollment. It is important to figure out and correct this shift for future generations of students headed into college, whether from rural, urban, or suburban high schools. Another area that should be looked at is how the transition from high school to college is different in other states or regions of the country since this study recruited participants from one area of one state. This will allow for broader findings on the experiences of students across the county. One other area which should be explored is how the transition is different for students who go to a large college as opposed to a small college. A small rural high school graduate might have a smoother transition to a small college than to a large college.

Based on the results of this study, I recommend that educators speak with students from rural communities more about college and their post-secondary plans and explore different

classroom strategies that will create more well-rounded students that can handle the transition to college better. Waiting for the last year and a half of high school to start the discussion of college should be changed. According to the results of this study, rural students are not feeling prepared for their college courses and need to be pushed more while they are in high school to be able to handle the level work they will receive once they graduate. Teachers should teach above the standards that the No Child Left Behind Act created and look further ahead. This would allow these students to be better prepared and have a smoother transition to the college level. In addition, counselors should speak with students in middle school or freshman year to start putting together a plan for low-income families to help cover the costs of college, for students who are unsure of a direction, and for rural students overall to be encouraged to seek out college and to complete it. Finally, administrators should come together to support the counselors, teachers, and communities that they work for by raising awareness and developing ways to support their areas once the students leave their halls. In the world today, having a post-secondary education in one form or another is vital for all students and it starts at the high school level.

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# Appendix

## Procedural Documents

This Appendix contains originals of all of the procedural documents for survey questionnaire research, which was conducted on Google Forms from October 13, 2019 to October 27, 2019. These include:

Consent Form (p. 19

Survey Questions (p. 21)

Each item is an accurate reproduction of the document developed and used to collect data for this research project. The survey question formats were based on Fink (2012).

## Informed Consent

### Brief Description

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between graduates of small rural high schools and their college completion. Individuals who volunteer to participate in this study will complete the following survey. It will take about 10 minutes of your time. The survey is completely anonymous. There are no direct benefits or rewards for participants in this study. Please read the remainder of this form before deciding if you want to volunteer to be in this research study.

My name is John Martin, I am a graduate student at the University of Mary Washington, and I am seeking your consent to participate in this research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. The information below explains the study in detail.

### Details of Participant Involvement

I am interested in learning more about the relationship between attending a rural high school and completing college. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey questionnaire about the challenges and successes of going to college that graduates of rural high schools experience.

### Privacy and Confidentiality

All information about participants will be entirely anonymous. This means that your name will not appear in any data collected or in any reports of this research, and neither I nor anyone else will be able to associate you with your data. When the research is complete, I will destroy all participant data.

### Risks and Benefits of Participation

The risks of participating in this study are very minimal. If any questions make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them. The benefit of this research is that it may contribute to better general understanding of the challenges and successes of going to college that graduates of rural high schools experience. There are no direct benefits to you as a participant.

### Participant Rights

You have the right to **ask any questions you have** before, during or after participation, in this survey. If you do not want to take this survey there will be no negative consequences for you. If you start the survey and later change your mind, you may withdraw by closing the window/website for the survey and all answers you have given will be deleted. As a voluntary participant in this research, you do not have to answer any survey questions you do not want to

answer. This research has been approved by the University of Mary Washington Institutional Review Board, a committee responsible for ensuring that the safety and rights of research participants are protected. For information about your rights as a research participant, contact the IRB chair, Dr. Jo Tyler (jtyler @ umw.edu).

**Contact Information**

For more information about this research before, during or after your participation, please contact me (jmarti23@umw.edu) or my university supervisor, Dr. Jo Tyler (jtyler@umw.edu).

**To be Completed by Participant**

I have read all of the information on this form. I choose, voluntarily, to participate in this research project. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

Agree, proceed to the survey questions

Disagree, close website

**Survey Questions**

1. Indicate your gender identity:

Male

Female

Other

Prefer not to say

2. Indicate your racial or ethnic identity:

White

African American

Asian

Latino

Mixed

Other

Prefer not to say

3. Did you attend a high school located in a mostly rural community?

Yes (if Yes, the survey will continue from question 4)

No (if No, Google forms will close and no additional questions will be asked)

4. Did you complete high school?

Yes

No

5. Was your high school graduating class less than 300?

Yes

No

6. What time period were you enrolled in high school?

Before 1980, 1981-1990, 1991-2000, 2001-Present

7. In general, which classes did you find difficult during your time in high school? (Check all that apply)

English

Math

Science

History

None of the above

8. In general, classes did you find to be easiest during your time in high school? (Check all that apply)

English

Math

Science

History

None of the above

9. I had adequate resources and materials for student success in my high school.

Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Disagree nor Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree

10. My high school and teachers encouraged me to attend college.

Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Disagree nor Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree

11. I feel my family and friends encouraged me to attend college.

Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Disagree nor Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree

12. At the time of your graduation from high school, had anyone in your family ever attended college?

Yes

No

13. How much on average was your family's annual income while you were enrolled in high school?

$50,000 and less

$50,001 to $150,000

$150,001 and more

14. Were you accepted into a 4-year college or university before completing high school?

Yes

No

15. Did you attend college at any period after graduating from high school?

Yes (If yes, survey will move to question 17 and continue)

No (If no, survey will move to question 16 and will close after question 16)

16. The cost of college was a factor in my decision not to enroll in college.

Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Disagree nor Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree

17. I had adequate knowledge to be prepared for college level courses.

Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Disagree nor Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree

18. I had accurate understanding of the demands of college level work.

Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Disagree nor Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree

19. How many years were you enrolled in college?

1 2 3 4 5 more than 5

20. In general, which classes did you find difficult during your time enrolled in college? (Check all that apply)

English

Math

Science

History

None of the above

21. In general, which classes did you find to be the easiest during your time enrolled in college? (Check all that apply)

English

Math

Science

History

None of the above

22. Did you obtain a bachelor's degree?

Yes (If Yes, the survey will end)

No (If No, the survey will move to question 23 and then end)

23. Which factors contributed to your leaving college or not obtaining your bachelor's degree? (Check all that apply)

High cost of attending college

Demands of college level course work

Not fitting in socially

Distance between college and home

Needed to get a job

Other