

Seeking Better Lives By Becoming Teachers In Rural South Georgia: Case Study

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Abstract

For four years the Investigator studied students in South Georgia attempting to become teachers. Three themes emerged impacting study subjects most. They are location, teacher education program, and the economy. South Georgia is one of the poorest rural regions in the United States. People are often place-bound and they endure chronic underemployment and intergenerational poverty. Higher education is a way up and out of poverty but difficult to access. A college opened satellite campuses to provide higher education opportunities for students who would otherwise not have access to a teacher education degree. The study focuses on challenges students experienced in the degree programs and issues with those programs and the college. Larger economic issues in the United States from 2007-2011 and their impact on the students, program, college, and region are also discussed.

Keywords: teachers, location, teacher education program, economy, rural poor, underemployment, poverty, satellite campus, teacher education degree, college

Seeking Better Lives By Becoming Teachers In Rural South Georgia: Case Study

For the past four years the Investigator followed the journeys of individuals in South Georgia seeking to emancipate themselves from chronic underemployment and intergenerational poverty through becoming teachers. The Investigator traveled thousands of miles across the region, investing countless hours, to come to know it and its people.

From July 1, 2007 through June 30, 2011 the Investigator studied the challenges and opportunities evident in being rural college students enrolled in teacher education programs. During these years the national economy faltered and people residing in rural regions continued to experience hardships greater than challenges faced by urban counterparts (O'Hare, 2009).

Rural poverty in the United States is well documented, pervasive, and chronic (Harrington, 1997). How the other half live has been chronicled in seminal articles, texts, graphs, and illustrations describing poverty (Hansen, 1971). Our society has had the habit of labeling the wealthy as being good people and the poor bad (Duncan, 1999). Poverty persists in rural America for a number of reasons, including inhabitants being place-bound and not having access to higher education (Shields, 2004).

This study focuses on people in South Georgia who pursued a higher education opportunity in order to live their dreams of having better lives and the consequences of doing so. The three themes impacting the subjects' journeys most are featured. The themes selected to be featured in this paper are location, teacher education degree program, and the economy. The combination of the three themes had substantial impact on the study subjects during the years of the investigation.

Location

South Georgia basically consists of the southern one-third of the state. It includes the cities of Savannah, Brunswick, Hinesville, and Statesboro in its eastern region. Macon and Dublin reside in the north central portion and Valdosta, Albany, Thomasville, and Bainbridge are situated in the southern and southwestern portions. In between these population centers visitors will experience seemingly endless miles of pine woods, pecan groves, cotton fields, peanuts, irrigated corn and beans, pasture land, and some tobacco fields. On the roads one will see countless log trucks coming from the woods and semis transporting container shipments to and from the coast. Little towns dot the coastal plains and rolling hills of the region. Visitors to this part of the country will wonder why the speed limits are reduced when they enter the little dead towns that obviously enjoyed their short lived golden years long ago. A reliable way to tell if you are in South Georgia, especially in the summer months, is the endless need to swat gnats away from your eyes and ears as you try to engage in any type of outdoor activity. Lifelong residents of the region are skilled at blowing away the gnats from their eyes with their breath, while not losing a single word in conversation. The Single A professional baseball team in Savannah is even named for the pesky insect. People in Georgia refer to the bug issue as “living below the gnat line,” which is basically any part of the state below Interstate 16 and U.S. 80.

The rural scenery varies across the region. In the southeast coastal plains the land is flat and the sky big. In the central portion the thick pine woods frame the roads and limits views. In the southern portions there are ditches alongside the roads to drain the swampland for farming. During droughts the ditches in the swamp areas are dry but rainy spells bring flowers, heron, and egrets. To the southwest there are giant live oaks and beautiful pastures on the way to the Florida

line. Several rivers meander through the region and they are especially scenic, featuring black water and white sand banks.

During the four year study the Investigator traveled thousands of miles through the region and he could count on one hand the mornings it rained. It rains little in the region and the summers are hot. One stop shops appear now and then on the highways featuring buffets, bait, ammunition, camouflage clothing, tobacco, cokes, and boiled peanuts. The Investigator, with the help of his wife, came to know these places as Bait & Buffets. Pole barn churches appear regularly as well. Fried foods and fundamentalism are favorites in these parts. Afternoon pop up thunderstorms do occur in the summer resulting in downpours and occasional flooding. In the evenings the heat coming up from the roads during a walk make them feel like kilns. The winters are mild with occasional cold spells. One can tell when the Midwest is being blasted by a winter storm because the north wind comes down through South Georgia with bone chilling effect. Dogwoods followed by azaleas in the spring are abundant and the crepe myrtle trees in the summer, known to some locals as red tops, are especially beautiful.

The social order is unique in South Georgia. It is feudal in nature. At the beginning of the twentieth century lumber barons became rich and powerful, even to the point of having one town in the region named Lumber City. Large, stately homes still exist from this era in the tiny towns and the families of the original lumber lords still own giant tracts of land. With most of the land being owned by a small number of people the rest of the population is divided into two groups: The haves and the have nots. A good old boy network exists in support of the uncommon land barons, while the rest of the rural population subsists and does what it can to get by. The Investigator came to know what good old boy means, particular to this region. Good old boys

here are friends of the few in cultural control and they seem to do little work. Instead, they ensure the social order stays in favor of the minority holding power through any and all means possible. The good old boys are charged with ensuring the status quo remains intact. Things do not change here and it often feels like going back in time when experiencing the most rural parts of the region. It is not uncommon to be an hour or more from a mall or other modern and convenient retail stores. Often the stores in the rural portions of the region feel like a place where items are sent that no one else wants. Cable television providers offer channel lineups that do not include channels such as Bravo and AMC, while still charging rates reflective of urban regions. Outsiders would probably conclude people in the region are gouged by retailers and other service providers, since it seems as though people in South Georgia don't know what they are missing. In conversations with more cosmopolitan, local residents who have had the occasion to travel beyond the region sometimes describe rural South Georgia as being Third World. When one departs from this place and heads back to other more urban and wealthy parts of the country, it conjures the feeling of returning to the United States from a place with few resources.

Opportunities are few for most residents of rural South Georgia. Still, there are many things that keep people here. In general there is a resistance to venture out and see new and different places. Though quality of life appears to be questionable to outsiders, the pace and way of life of the region seem comfortable to most of its inhabitants. Some residents have prospered, relatively speaking, and when they do they acquire the local artifacts representing wealth. Having a pond created on your land is a symbol of wealth in this region. In addition to having one's pond created, owning a nice pickup truck and glittery bass boat are symbols of success and highly prized.

Teacher Education Degree Program

South Georgia is one of the poorest regions of the United States. In such a region jobs are difficult to find and careers nearly non-existent. In such a place teaching is perceived to be a way to escape chronic underemployment and intergenerational poverty. While teaching is sometimes perceived as a low paying vocation in wealthier regions of the country, it is viewed as an economic way up and out of poverty for many in South Georgia. Therefore, the ability to become a teacher in South Georgia is highly prized. The steady pay and benefits are viewed as highly desirable and such a position places a person in relative economic security. However, in many parts of South Georgia it is simply too costly and far to travel to and from a college on a daily basis to obtain a Bachelor's degree in teacher education.

With this in mind a college decided to open satellite campuses a decade ago to provide teacher education degree opportunities for people who could not otherwise obtain them. The college was a private, Christian-based school with considerable tuition rates. However, financial aid in the form of student loans made the highly prized teacher education degree a real possibility. People who could otherwise not pursue a teacher education degree now had the option if they were willing to wager large amounts of money for four years of tuition, books, and fees. While the amount for a degree seemed daunting the possibility of a better life with steady income and benefits was extremely attractive. Additionally, the ability to borrow all funds needed for the degree enabled the rural poor with no money to potentially realize their dream. It was an economic gamble many were willing to take. The college located one site in a place that previously housed an academy which had closed. The second location was newly constructed.

Needing to ensure revenue for its venture the college opted to relax its already open admissions requirements, complementing the chronic lower performance of rural poor students on achievement tests. In some cases potential students with single digit percentile rankings on the Standardized Achievement Test (SAT) were admitted to the college, with the notion that open enrollment provides people the chance to obtain a college degree. Adjuncts were hired to teach the needed content and education courses exclusively at one of the sites and one full time content instructor and one full time education professor, along with many adjuncts, were placed at the second site. Most potential students worked full time for low wages during the day so it was determined courses would be offered in the evenings to accommodate the potential student populations. The position of Dean of External Programs was created and filled, as well as full time site director positions. The Dean would ensure the quality of the programs and oversee budgets, while the site directors would recruit and retain students and oversee daily operations. The site directors would also facilitate financial aid opportunities by working closely with the financial aid office on the college's main campus.

Success was immediate for the sites offering teacher education degrees in the formerly educationally deprived rural region and enrollments quickly swelled. The college began enjoying surplus revenue from the satellite campuses that was placed in the general fund and used at the administration's discretion. Two million dollars of annual tuition money began to be realized from the remote campuses venture. Scores of students who previously had no higher education option suddenly found themselves living their dreams of possibly escaping poverty and underemployment through becoming teachers.

As mentioned previously students in the remote teacher education programs were juggling several responsibilities. Nearly all students worked full time during the day. Many had children and substantial household responsibilities. Some were single mothers which compounded their time commitments to work and home. Often students were paraprofessionals in schools aspiring to become teachers in order to enjoy the additional, needed pay. With these responsibilities beyond college classes in mind, adjunct instructors were encouraged by the students to modify courses to complement the realities of the vocational, familial, and academic responsibilities.

The External Dean's position was filled by several different people in a short time. Initial attention to program quality gradually gave way to emphasis on revenue generation for the college, as enrollment issues became a concern on the main campus; due to a lack of visionary leadership in the upper echelon of the administration. The Dean observed content course remote adjuncts once a year and the methods utilized did not reflect exemplary clinical supervision. The observation instrument was rudimentary, reinforced didactic pedagogy, and lacked formative and diagnostic feedback opportunities. On the teacher education side of the remote programs there was no supervision of adjunct instructors. By design, the supervision of education instructors was managed through the Provost's office and not the remote sites Dean. Therefore in a short time the courses, both content and teacher education, were not reflective of any original quality intent and they did not mirror their main campus counterparts. Chairs of academic divisions on the main campus were not responsible for the instructors at the remote sites which further disenfranchised quality of instruction. A relic of the lack of connectedness between main campus courses and remote ones was when remote instructors were asked to come to the main campus to secure syllabi for their courses one week after their courses had already begun. Contracts for full

time main campus instructors were such that they did not align with the start dates of academic terms of the remote sites, thereby causing adjuncts to not have needed content and pedagogy guidance for their courses. This signaled to remote adjuncts that were poorly supervised they could basically do as they liked without consequence.

Some students at the rural sites were pleased with the lack of quality and rigor in the academic programs, or they simply did not know how college courses should be since they had not experienced them previously. Their achievement test scores had been low, their K-12 experience in poor rural schools had not adequately prepared them for college, and they were juggling low paying full time jobs and family responsibilities with college classes. In extreme cases instructors would hold students for only a brief time each week, even though they were to meet for two and one half hours. In some cases courses would not meet for several weeks. Some course assignments also became questionable in that little to no student work was submitted to instructors. In one case a teacher education reading course yielded a one page opinion paper for the entire term on any book students had ever read. Students received high grades for the remote courses and eventually received degrees, sometimes with honors.

The degrees granted through these questionable means were supported by the good reputation of the college and its long history in the region, combined with the fact that it was Christian-based. Students and others would not dare question the legitimacy of the degree from such an institution.

Interestingly, graduates of the programs were successful in securing teacher positions for several years. The college marketing plan revealed the placement rate of remote sites graduates as teachers in schools to attract more rural poor students to the programs. However, years into

the programs local school districts began to become concerned with the quality of new teachers graduating from the programs. In a short time the districts began to discuss quality issues and public school administrators confided in school boards there were quality issues in the remote teacher education programs.

In 2006 the state decided to shift from the Praxis II test to the Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators (GACE) and required graduates of Georgia colleges and universities to pass it prior to receiving teacher certification. The Praxis test was largely theoretical in nature. Its focus was on teacher pedagogy and practice and it largely tested the how of teaching. Students generally did well on the exam since it did not require high consensus, absolute knowledge. The GACE exam however was content based, high consensus, and very knowledge particular in nature. Its focus was on testing whether teacher education students had necessary content knowledge or not. Pedagogy and practice took a back seat to having content knowledge on the high stakes teacher examination. The combination of admitting low performing students to the rural teacher education sites and lack of rigor in the content courses translated into low pass rates on the GACE Content examination. Concurrent with the low pass rates on the new state test, an accreditation visit from both the state and national accrediting bodies occurred in 2006. Program problems discussed previously, combined with additional ones discovered by the accreditors, were revealed through the visits. Additionally, a third teacher education remote site had been established by the college without the consent and approval of the state's accreditation commission. While the college administration denied such an illegal site existed it was advertised on the college's website. The teacher education unit was placed on probation by both the state and national accreditors as a result of the 2006 visit. A follow up visit was scheduled for Spring, 2009 and the college had to address the issues and problems in the

programs. The college faced the reality of either transforming the teacher education programs to meet accreditation standards, in order to continue to enjoy millions of dollars of needed revenue, or lose the programs and revenue upon the return visit in 2009.

In the spring of 2007 the college launched a national search for a new Chair who would be responsible for transforming the teacher education Unit to such a degree the accrediting bodies would allow the college to continue with the programs. A new Chair was hired and began July 1, 2007. The new Chair would have twenty-two months in which to effect the needed transformations. The teacher education faculty feared a college spread rumor the new Chair was coming to fire them. The Chair immediately disquieted the rumors by assuring the education faculty they were all needed. One faculty member had been honored at a retirement party prior to the Chair's arrival and was in the midst of departing. Instead she was convinced by the Chair to remain at the college for at least another year. Another teacher education faculty member who had wanted to become Chair, but was refused an interview for the position, sought other employment and departed quickly. Still another full time instructor who helped with facilitating the education programs at the external sites resigned and departed as well.

The new Chair visited the Unit's state accreditation consultant in Atlanta two weeks after arriving. The state consultant was helpful and several hours were spent discussing problems with the Unit and its personalities. The consultant told the Chair, "The problem with your Unit is it doesn't follow its own rules." On the several hour drive back to South Georgia from Atlanta the Chair reflected on the conversation with the consultant and tried to make sense of what had been shared. Shortly thereafter the Chair came to know what the accreditation consultant meant when they said the Unit did not follow its own rules. In reviewing the thirty-two student files for

those preparing to student teach in August, 2007 the Chair discovered twenty four of the thirty two students were in violation of the Unit's rules. The discovery had the potential for being the turning point for the Unit. The Chair could make the difficult decision of stopping the twenty four students from student teaching until such time they were within the Unit's rules, or allow them to student teach and continue to be in violation; subsequently taking the Unit down the path to being shut down for violating rules by the accreditors in less than two years. The Chair notified the administration of their decision to stop the twenty four students from student teaching and the administration agreed, while asking the Chair to do their best to appease the students as much as possible and keep things quiet. Thus began the transformation of the Unit. For three weeks the Chair worked with the twenty four students across South Georgia to cause those to be within the rules so they could student teach. The subsequent workdays were remarkable, with the Chair departing from the office between 10 and 11 p.m. nightly. In the third week of solving the problems the Chair departed from the office on a Thursday night only to discover it was still light outside. In South Georgia it is light until after 9 p.m. in the summers. The Chair was at a bit of a loss as to what to do with the remaining twilight since they had become accustomed to working into the darkness of the nights for several weeks to solve the many problems of the twenty-four students who were in violation of the Unit rules. Eventually all of the students were in compliance and permitted to continue with their student teaching. The Unit had turned the proverbial corner and was on its way to transforming.

The Chair soon realized the courses at the remote sites lacked quality and rigor. With such little time to prepare for the accreditation visits, it was determined to be best to cause the main campus full time teacher education faculty to teach the education courses at both the remote sites and main campus. In the Chair's estimation this would be the most efficient way to

ensure the courses were effective, since the full time faculty were in the same location and accessible for training and oversight daily.

The college had an online learning management system (LMS) that was not being used. Interestingly, during the interview of the new Chair in April, 2007, prior to their being hired, the search committee chair had mentioned the candidate for the Chair position had extensive online teaching experience but went on to say there would never be online courses at the college. Four short months later, after the Chair proposed online courses to combine students on the main campus and remote sites to the President and it was approved, the President of the college publicly announced to the college faculty and staff that online courses would prove to be what would save the college. Unfortunately there was no online course development training available at the college since in fact there had been no online courses and an aversion for same. The Chair realized they would need to provide the training and cause the courses to be launched within a semester and began training and course development accordingly. The Chair requested and received course development stipends for the teacher education faculty as an incentive to make the needed course transformations. Within one term all teacher education courses were online and main campus students were combined with those at the remote sites. The reduction of adjuncts teaching remote site courses translated into greater net earnings for the college as well, not to mention reduced number of sections of education courses and increased enrollments in each. Course quality and consistency became evident across the three sites offering teacher education programs and degrees. In the second year of the new course delivery, prior to the accreditation visit, synchronous technology was added to the courses so students and instructors could see one another and meet in real time, in addition to asynchronous discussion boards. In addition to the incorporation of synchronous technology, the Chair determined it would be best

to have all teacher education students come to the main campus three Saturdays a term for face to face classes. Students from across Georgia traveled to the main campus to interact with each other. Some traveled four hours each way to the seminars to attempt to realize their dreams of becoming teachers. Once again the Chair provided the training for the new online synchronous feature, due to their being no other training possibilities, to ensure consistency and quality across all of the teacher education courses. With the courses reinvented and quality filled, the Chair was then able to focus on other Unit matters that needed transformation prior to the accreditation visit.

Changes in the teacher education courses at the remote sites caused many problems. Students accustomed to less than rigorous courses complained about new workloads in courses and argued full time traditional students could do more in courses than they could since they had full time jobs and families. Several students said it was unfair to expect adults with jobs and families to do the same amount of course work as traditionally aged full time students. While the remote students concerns were welcomed and heard, the Chair advised the remote students to consider taking fewer courses if necessary so they could manage all of their responsibilities. The remote students said they could not afford to go to part time status due to needed financial aid and the Chair told them that was their decision and to make needed life schedule changes accordingly. Soon thereafter most remote site students assimilated to the new demands of the teacher education courses and adjusted their schedules. However, word quickly spread across the rural region that the programs had changed and they now consisted of a lot of work. Having rigorous courses at the remote sites caused low performing students to reconsider enrolling in the programs. Some knew they were not academically prepared for such courses, while others did not even know they were not prepared. While the financial cost for the degree had been

substantial, the work for the degree in the past had been less than challenging. On the other hand students who actually wanted a substantive teacher education program located in their rural part of the world now had one and there were several students who supported the changes. The students who were well into the teacher education programs at the remote sites, and low performing, had the greatest difficulty adjusting to the revised courses, as they had become accustomed to courses the Chair referred to as Education-light.

Low GACE Content pass rates continued to be a problem at the remote sites. The Chair realized they must do something to try to help the students pass the test. As mentioned previously the GACE was content focused and students preparing to student teach had already had their content courses. Those content courses for the most part had been academically shallow and students often did not receive the content needed to pass the high stakes test. Accreditation rules required teacher education Units to maintain an eighty percent pass rate on the GACE exam. The Chair had to require students pass the GACE Content Examination prior to student teaching and graduating to ensure the Unit had the required pass rate. If the Unit did not possess the pass rate it would be shut down. Low performing students at the remote sites already struggled with passing the examination. A group of remote students wrote a letter to the director of the state accrediting commission expressing their concern about lack of content course quality in the programs and he replied saying his agency knew about the problem and something would be done about it. The reply letter from the director was copied and distributed to many students and others at the remote sites. Some students opted to depart from the teacher education major and instead pursue a general studies degree that did not require passing a test. However, the general studies degree did not allow them to be teachers thereby dashing their original goal and dream. Others opted to retake the test several times to see if they could pass it and eventually

student teach and graduate. Still others left the program and college knowing they could not pass the test, saddled with student loans. Students who had taken all course work except student teaching and continued to attempt to pass GACE had to begin repaying their student loans after being out of school for six months. The Chair convinced the college administration to provide seminars to help the students pass the test. Content and education instructors sat for the examination and then prepared three hour seminar classes in each of the four core content subjects. Student attendance at these seminars was remarkably low and feedback from students attending them varied from their being useful to their being a waste of time.

The college hired a new enrollment director in 2007 and enrollments increased in the 2008-2009 academic year. In April, 2009 state and national teacher education accreditation teams visited the campus to determine whether the teacher education Unit would be allowed to continue. The new Chair and teacher education faculty had been given twenty two months to transform the Unit in 2007. At the end of the four day intensive visit the team of nine investigators determined the Unit met all state and national standards. The chairs of the state and national teams met with the Chair, President, and Provost for an exit interview to share the good news. The administration was elated and people across the college described the visit results as a miracle. One vice-president described the Chair's work as making bricks without straw. The President proclaimed the Chair was responsible for the greatest thing that had ever happened to the college in its one hundred plus year history. In the presence of the Chair the President told the Provost, "This might be what saves us!"

Unfortunately, the college's administration decided to eliminate many majors on the main campus and announced this decision in December, 2009. This led to a substantial attrition

of traditional students in 2009 and 2010. The loss of students resulted in a fiscal deficit for the sixth year in a row at the college. Rather than developing a strategic plan derived from visionary leadership the administration decided to continue to reduce the college's economy of scale. The college's budget was reduced by forty percent from 2007 through 2010. The administration decided to close the two satellite sites in South Georgia, as of December, 2009, in the spirit of reducing costs and heading off concerns that would result from a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation visit in 2010. The decision impacted the teacher education programs greatly since eighty percent of the majors in the programs were located at the remote sites. Rather than merely abandoning the teacher education students at the closing remote sites, the Chair of Education worked with Education faculty advisors to retain the students, especially since the education courses were already hybrid ones and did not require remote site classrooms. While the college had forecast an immediate twenty percent shrinkage of students due to the closing of the remote sites the Education advisors were able to hold the enrollment shrinkage to eight percent. The prior reinvention of the education courses to ensure quality and rigor had made the need for remote sites moot. Teacher education students could continue in their programs even though the remote sites were closing. However, attempting to coax new students to join the distant teacher education programs and Saturday drive-in seminars would be especially difficult without physical sites located in their part of their world and no courses offered beyond education. Additionally, the persistent low pass rate on the required GACE Content examination would hinder attracting new students, due to the questionable courses of the recent past at the remote sites, combined with having admitted so many low performing students to the programs. The Chair realized the best prospect would be to help the existing students from the closing remote sites attempt to complete their programs as much as

possible. As had often been the case since the new Education Chair's arrival in 2007, they and designated Education faculty traveled to the remote sites to meet with the students. To the Chair's surprise the students were not hesitant to remain in the programs and instead asked how soon the college could offer a Masters program in Education. Most students decided to remain in the programs despite losing their physical campus sites. About half of the remote students in 2010 and 2011 eventually passed the GACE examination and went on to student teach and graduate. Unfortunately, the other half of the many students did not pass the examination and were not able to student teach and complete their teacher education programs. In the most recent term two-thirds of the students hoping to student teach were not allowed doing so due to not passing the GACE exam. The student enrollment numbers in these programs had represented approximately eighty percent of the college's total enrollment in teacher education programs. The Education department was the college's largest at the time of the closing of the remote sites. The loss of the remote sites and prospective students exacerbated the college's financial woes and intensified the administration's practice of reducing the college's economy of scale.

Students who would have enrolled in the college's remote teacher education programs discovered an online teacher education program offered by a college in Iowa. They flocked to this new opportunity, while the state accreditation commission began to scrutinize such out of state online degree programs. The state standards commission concluded out of state online colleges offering teacher education programs needed to possess national accreditation, in order for the degrees to be considered for teacher certification in Georgia. Losing the remote physical campuses and the out of state online teacher education program opportunities resulted in rural students once again not having access to teaching degrees. No longer having access to teaching

degrees meant the goal of having a better life through becoming a teacher was no longer a possibility in many parts of rural South Georgia.

The Economy

The college's arrangement of providing teacher education programs to students in remote parts of South Georgia, who could otherwise not obtain college degrees, worked well for several years. Regardless of the college's original intent, the programs merely became revenue generators for the college with questionable quality, rigor, and merit. While the top quartile of teacher education students located in the rural hinterland of South Georgia could have thrived and succeeded in any program, students beyond that quartile were often ill equipped for college and low performing. Students scoring in the single digit percentiles on the SAT were admitted to the college and sold on the idea they could become teachers. Those students seemingly enjoyed the lack of rigor and quality in the programs that existed prior to the accreditation scrutiny. While the cost of the four year degree was substantial, the funds could be borrowed through federal financial aid and repaid over an extended period while graduates enjoyed increased incomes. Teaching credentials were the ticket out of chronic underemployment and intergenerational poverty. Graduates could remain in the region and enjoy a relatively good standard of living. From the economic good times of the late 1990s through 2007, the placement rate of graduates in teaching positions from these programs was basically one hundred percent. Basically, all graduates of the programs who sought teaching positions were able to obtain them through August, 2008. The rate of placement encouraged more students to enter the programs making it the second largest private college teacher education program in Georgia. The remote

sites generated millions of dollars of tuition for the college and things went smoothly for all parties until the fourth quarter of 2008.

In 2006 wealthier areas of the United States began to realize a substantial economic slowdown. Places like Southwest Florida, Southern California, and Clark County, Nevada (Las Vegas) that had enjoyed booming economies in the first five years of the new millennium found themselves on the proverbial economic ropes. South Georgia was chronically, economically depressed so the early economic warning signs of The Great Recession were not felt as they were in more prosperous and speculative regions. It was not until the bank crisis and stock market collapse of October, 2008 that South Georgia began to feel the effects of the ailing economy. At the time the college had experienced several years of being in the red despite the generous income from the remote sites. Additionally, the vast majority of the college's twenty million dollar endowment was invested in the stock market and a forty percent loss of same was quickly realized. Years of administrative mismanagement and lack of institutional stewardship dovetailed with the national economic crisis. Financially, the latter part of 2008 was the perfect storm for the college. Interestingly, the administration was able to point to the macroeconomic crisis and declare it to be the culprit of the college's economic woes. The timing could not have been better for blaming microeconomic mismanagement on macroeconomic problems. The Great Recession shrouded the financial incompetence and lack of vision of the college's leadership for the next two and one half years. In 2011 the administration came to the conclusion it was time to depart.

Concurrent with the college's financial woes the state realized substantial reductions in revenues used to fund public K-12 schools. The reduced revenue in 2009, 2010, and 2011

resulted in school districts announcing furlough days for teachers, reduction in force of teachers, and the inability to hire new teachers. While nearly all graduates of the remote teacher education programs were able to secure jobs in 2009, the opposite occurred in 2010 and 2011 when most graduates were unable to secure teaching jobs. Graduates accustomed to generations of microeconomic misfortune in South Georgia, attempting to escape that financial plight through becoming teachers, were now victims of the macroeconomic misfortune as well.

The gamble to obtain \$50,000.00 in student loans paid off for graduates of the remote teacher education programs for several years. However, those possessing the bad luck of graduating from the programs in 2010 and 2011 lost the proverbial bet and faced repaying substantial student loans without opportunities for increased income to do so. Due to changes in program rigor and quality from 2007 to 2009, resulting from accreditation pressures and a new Chair who ensured the Unit met all standards, many students had been unable to complete the programs and faced daunting debt repayment without the means to do so. In addition to the students caught in the transition from a questionable program to a nationally accredited one, students who were actually successful in passing the GACE examination and graduating from the teacher education programs now faced debts they could not repay.

Summary

Often people residing in rural poor regions of the country have little opportunity to better themselves through higher education and careers providing compensation above the poverty level. In many locations in South Georgia more than half of the inhabitants live below the poverty line. Colleges are geographically distant and the commute cost is beyond the means of many. The region is one of the poorest in the United States. When an education opportunity

comes about in a region such South Georgia, offering the chance to liberate one's self from chronic underemployment and intergenerational poverty, it is something that must be seriously considered. However, if the opportunity seems too good to be true then it probably is.

In the case of the teacher education programs studied by the Investigator, they offered opportunities for many people to escape chronic underemployment and poverty through obtaining teacher jobs for several years. While programs studied were questionable in quality and rigor, in the early years of their existence, the demand for new teachers in the region overshadowed the programs' shortcomings. However, scores of students who were late adopters of the opportunity found themselves in a situation where they amassed substantial amounts of debt without new employment opportunities. Regardless of any original intent of the college providing sound teacher education programs in the rural areas, they became little more than cash cows and diploma mills. The value of program accreditation became very apparent in this study when it was determined by those groups the teacher education programs would need to quickly transform or cease to exist. The programs did in fact transform and met all state and national standards, due to the college hiring a Chair who could perform the needed tasks. However, students who had been accustomed to courses and programs with little rigor and quality got caught in the middle of the required transformation. Many found themselves unable to complete the degrees, compounded by not being able to pass the required content examination to become certified teachers. The accrediting bodies did what they were supposed to do effectively, while the college and its administration did not until such time they had no choice in order to keep the programs. In addition to college and accreditation issues and concerns, the faltering of the larger economy dealt a death blow to the dreams of the rural students to secure teaching jobs. Many people wagered amounts of money beyond their economic comprehensions and lost due to being

ill prepared for college, content and teacher education courses lacking quality and rigor, lack of administrative vision and stewardship, and The Great Recession. For those students the dream to escape chronic underemployment and intergenerational poverty through higher education became economic nightmares. They accrued debt they may well never be able to repay. Of course many important choices in life are risk filled, but when a college does not provide what it should and instead exploits disadvantaged people it becomes more than the student consumer's fault. When an institution of higher education takes economic advantage of its student population it violates covenants of trust and hope. Higher education can be a way up and out of poverty. The damage done in South Georgia is far greater than what happened to the study subjects who accrued debt with no means to repay. Word of mouth regarding the downsides of seeking a college education and becoming a teacher will do inestimable damage to the people of the region for some time to come. As we near 2012 the economic news is no better than that of 2009, 2010, or 2011. Place-bound students in the region no longer have access to completing teacher education programs, in attempts to better their lives, and K-12 schools for the most part continue to not be able to hire teachers as they once did.

Poverty levels in South Georgia may well be higher than reported. This year the Census Bureau is introducing the new Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). Current poverty levels are derived from determining the cost of an emergency food diet for a family of three. The calculation does not factor the cost of taxes and non-cash benefits against family income. While the SPM will not be used to increase government aid it will illuminate the higher actual percentage of rural people living in poverty. It is likely the poverty percentages for South Georgia will be higher and more realistic using the new measure. Hopefully, the adjusted percentages of those living in poverty will be used to increase awareness of the problems. It will

be interesting to see what happens economically in South Georgia, and other poor rural regions of the United States, in the years to come.

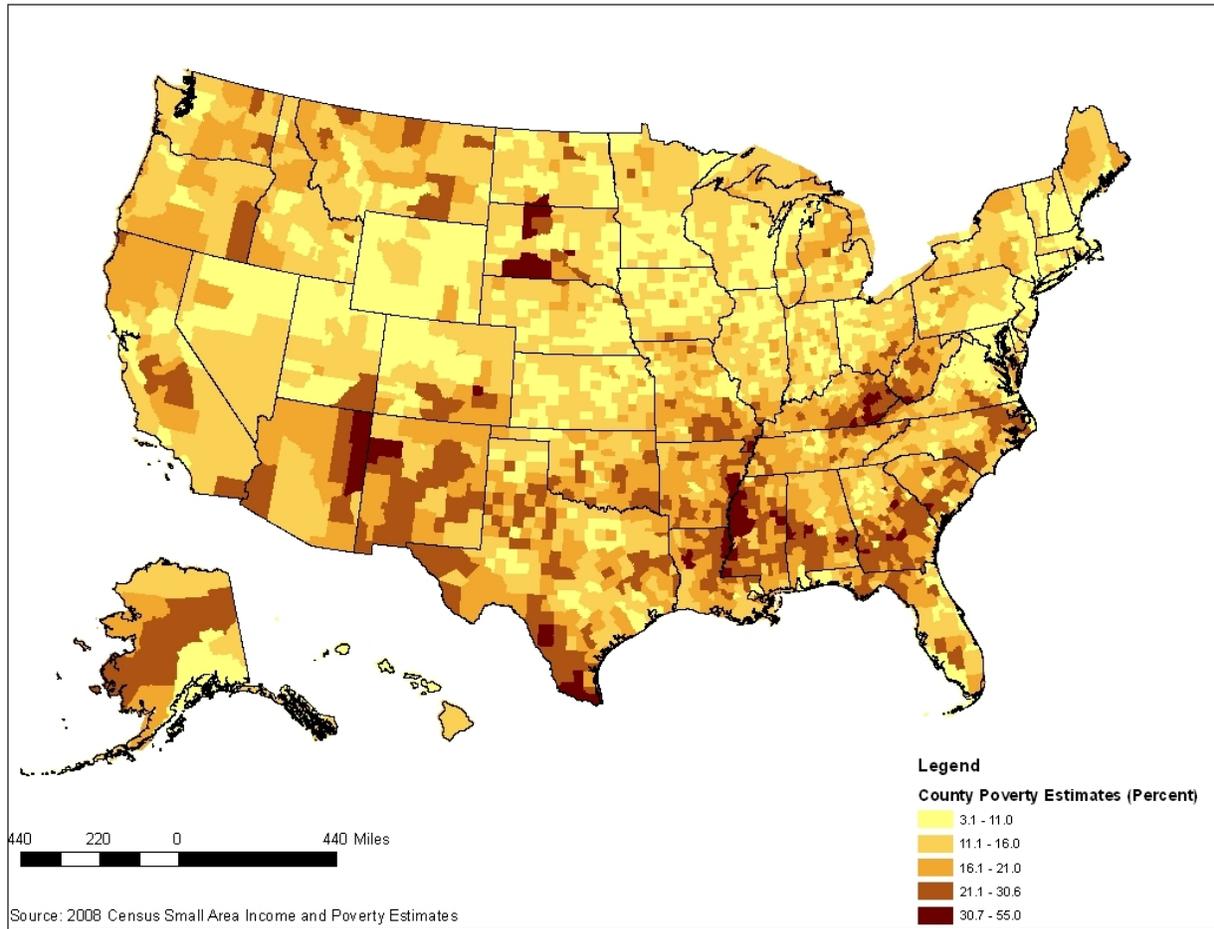


Figure 1. 2009 U.S. County Poverty Estimates (Percent), ruralhome.org

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