

## **BELIEFS AND VALUES AMONG RURAL CITIZENS: SHARED EXPECTATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT?**

*Discussions at the local, state, and national level have been focused on the importance of providing access and opportunity for college attendance. While these discussions are important to raising public interest in higher education attainment, they often negate how community values influence the college attendance decision process. This study sought to examine the beliefs and values of citizens in a rural mid-South county in order to understand how those beliefs and values might affect the decision to attend college. Data were collected from community members in a rural county with assistance from the chamber of commerce. A total of  $N = 220$  citizens completed the instrument, which measured their beliefs and values associated with having a high regard for educational attainment. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was utilized to analyze the responses to the items contained in the instrument. Six factors emerged through the analysis of data, including value for education and quality of life, community identity and loyalty, social consciousness, value for religion and health, entertainment and leisure activities, and information access.*

There has been speculation about what has affected the college going rate of rural American citizens over the past several decades. Recently there has been an increased focus upon the importance of providing both opportunity and access to postsecondary education throughout the United States through various initiatives at the local, state, and national level. The effect of this increased focus will likely be unknown for some time, given the myriad of factors which influence college attendance decisions. Likewise, it is questionable if efforts to improve the college going rate of rural American citizens can be successful given that so much is unknown about the influence of community norms on the decision to attend college.

Youth of rural America, and urban America for that matter, are influenced greatly by their school, home environments, communities, and peers. Parents and other adults in communities exhibit beliefs and values through actions that are indicative of expectations of youth, specifically the expectation to go to college. However, it is uncertain how these beliefs and values are congruent with expectations of attending college and earning a degree. This study sought to examine the beliefs and values of citizens in a rural mid-South county who owned, operated, or were employed by businesses that were major employers in the county in order to understand how those beliefs and values might influence the decision to attend college. Identification and understanding of the beliefs and values among influential rural citizens associated with major businesses and employers

is essential if efforts to promote educational attainment of rural America are to be successful.

### **Literature Review**

Students choose to attend college for a variety of reasons. Many see college as a simple expectation, something passed on from parents, friends, and relatives, while others are considered first-generation college students, meaning that they are the first in their family to attend college. A number of studies have suggested variables that impact college participation, including socio-economic status (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; St. John, 2003), level of preparation and career preparation expectation (Wilensky, 2007), financial aid (Paulsen & St. John, 1997; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988), and the cost of college (St. John, 2003). Although college attendance has been predicted by a number of variables, research has been further expanded to understand how other factors affect college attendance, specifically social, cultural, and economic capital (Perna & Titus, 2005). Furthermore, prior academic success and adequate preparation are both considered to be indicative of an individual's intent to attend college (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Perhaps the issue is further complicated by what Burnell (2003) described as contradictions between the expected outcomes of a high school education and adult identity development which affect post-high school decisions.

Parents and familial influences have been found to have an impact on the decision to attend college. Research on youth in the rural South indicated that parents remained a significant influence for youth regarding career decisions in late adolescence when peers and teachers became more significant to youth (Peterson, Stivers, & Peters, 1986). Rural parents, despite their level of education, are concerned about the career choices that their children will make (Reagor & Rehm, 1995). Parental involvement in the decision of a student to attend college is influenced by schools, higher education institutions, economic forces, and state policies (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). For example, children of parents of lower status families who were involved in the school system and community were more likely to attend college (McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2001). Other research has indicated parental influence even extends to decisions made in college. Ma (2009) observed that a gap existed among college students from lower socioeconomic status and "well-off" families regarding the pursuit of careers with higher paying salaries.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The model of community expectancy (Deggs & Miller, 2009, 2011) was adopted as the theoretical framework for this study. The importance of cultural norms in communities is emphasized in the model and the multiple

influences of community components are addressed. The model's five components include formal education bodies, civic agencies, informal associations, religious affiliations, and home life. Interaction among the various constructs within each of the five components of the model is believed to impact life choice decisions including the decision to complete high school, attend college, get a job, or start a family. Collective interaction among the five components results in a series of expectations among citizens about what is considered acceptable choices, as determined by community norms, for life decisions, especially those related to educational attainment.

### **Research Setting**

A predominantly rural county in a mid-South state was selected for this study based upon its unique characteristics. The research team contacted the county chamber of commerce, which agreed to assist with data collection efforts. The county in which this study was conducted had a population of approximately 30,000 people as of the 2000 Census with only 11.2% of adults 25 years of age or older holding a baccalaureate degree or higher. The county seat had a population of approximately 9,000 as of the 2000 Census with 11.7% of adults 25 years of age or older holding a baccalaureate degree or higher. There are five school districts within the county and the county seat hosts a technical-community college with an annual enrollment of approximately 1,500 students from a four-county service region.

The county's economy is grounded in agricultural based industries, specifically the production of cattle and crops such as hay, soybeans and rice. Timber production remains important to the county's economy and there are several lumber yards and sawmills in the county and surrounding area. The county also has a brick plant, drywall manufacturing plant, and call center for a major telecommunications company. An interstate highway runs through the county and the state capital is approximately one hour away. Discussions with chamber of commerce members indicated that some people commute to the state capital for work at higher paying jobs. This is attributed in part to the loss of agriculture and manufacturing jobs throughout the county over the past couple of decades. These discussions also revealed that some retirees are drawn to the area due to the cheaper costs of homes and land.

### **Methodology and Instrumentation**

The research team worked with the chamber of commerce to disseminate the instrument to community members. The chamber of commerce staff collaborated with the chamber's education and economic development committees to disseminate the instrument to businesses that were encouraged to disseminate the instrument to employees. The in-

strument was accessible via the internet and a link to the instrument was emailed to the membership by the chamber of commerce staff. The research team obtained an exemption from institution review board (IRB) oversight prior to commencing with data collection.

The instrument was designed to gather data from rural citizens regarding their beliefs and values relative to their roles, specifically those which are indicative of having a high regard for educational attainment. This study focused on the examination of beliefs and values among rural citizens who owned, operated, or were employed by businesses that were major employers in the county. Identification of the beliefs and values among these individuals who were in a position of influence and who had a high regard for educational attainment was important to understanding the prevailing norms of the community, specifically the decision to attend college.

The items contained in the instrument can be traced to the findings of Putnam (2000), Miller and Tuttle (2006, 2007), and Deggs and Miller (2009, 2011). A total of 50 scale items were included in the instrument. Respondents were asked to respond to these 50 scale items utilizing a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The observed Cronbach's alpha for the scale items observed in this study was .68 which was deemed to be acceptable. The instrument included demographic items including gender, town or school district of residence, marital status, educational level, and age.

## **Results**

### **Description of Respondents**

A total of  $N = 220$  individuals responded to the request to complete the instrument. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) program. The majority of the respondents were female ( $n = 141$ , 64.7%), lived in the county seat ( $n = 165$ , 79.3%), and were married ( $n = 170$ , 78.3%). A total of  $n = 45$  (20.8%) had attended college without earning a degree and  $n = 27$  (12.5%) held an associate's degree. A total of  $n = 63$  (29.2%) held a baccalaureate degree and  $n = 51$  (23.6%) held a graduate degree. The average age of the respondents was 49.7 years of age ( $SD = 13.4$ ). A total of  $n = 187$  (85%) had children.

### **Exploratory Factor Analysis**

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was utilized to analyze responses to the 50 scale items. According to Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010), "factor analysis provides the tools for analyzing the structure of interrelationships (correlations) among a large number of variables by defin-

ing sets of variables that are highly intercorrelated” (p. 94). Responses to the 50 scale items were initially assessed to determine their suitability for factor analysis. Through this process it was observed that the Kaiser-Meyer-Okin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) was .665 and that the Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was significant  $\chi^2 = 3100.96$ ,  $df = 1225$ ,  $p = .000$ . Further review of the Initial Eigenvalues and their cumulative percentage indicated that the first six factors with Eigenvalues above one (1) explained 38.20% of the total variance among the fifty scale items. Factor rotation was then conducted for the first six factors (see table one).

**Table 1**

*Factor Loadings of Rural Citizens’ Beliefs and Values*

Factor	1	2	3	4	5	6
Access to education is important	.698					
Do intellectual things with my friends/neighbors	.696					
Thinking about education is important	.694					
Young people here have the opportunity to go to college	.613					
Value my quality of life	.425					
Have trouble finding interesting things to do in this town	-.413					
Others should make this town better	-.364					
Alpha	-.832					
Have no trouble finding interesting things to do		.595				
Community has cultural things I like		.587				
Proud of my community		.570				
Economic opportunities exist in this community		.567				
Community has its own personality		.555				
Schools do a good job of preparing youth for jobs		.551				
People here are open-minded		-.501				
Leaving here for college is a good thing		-.489				

(continued)

**Table 1** (continued)

Factor	1	2	3	4	5	6
Schools do a good job of preparing youth for college		-.418				
Young people plan on staying in the community		.406				
Alpha		.726				
Visit with others in the community			.615			
Stay current with national issues			.600			
Frequently get involved in politics			.597			
Volunteer my time regularly			.573			
Spend quality time with my family			.505			
Visit a bookstore			.453			
Read on a regular basis			.410			
Participate in sports			.409			
Travel frequently to see other places			.401			
Being involved in the community is important			.371			
Community has its own personality			.359			
Alpha			.661			
Healthy eating habits are important				.708		
Participate in activities at my place of worship				.699		
Go to church frequently				.655		
Travel out of town frequently				.586		
Do intellectual things with my friends/neighbors				.490		
Alpha				.070		
Go to the theatre frequently					.632	
Go to the movies					.605	
Participate in civic groups					.474	
Go the public library frequently					.389	

(continued)

**Table 1** (continued)

Factor	1	2	3	4	5	6
Do many things at the local school					.375	
Religion is important					-.370	
Participating in civic organizations is important					.328	
Visit a bookstore					.317	
Alpha					.647	
Am involved in activities primarily with my neighbors/friends						-.563
Thinking about education is important						.527
Watch television						.519
Use the internet frequently						.512
Go the museum frequently						.422
Alpha						.451

### **Factors Indicative of Educational Attainment**

The first factor in the factor analysis indicated that rural citizens valued education and the quality of life. The second factor suggested that rural citizens wished to maintain community identity and loyalty. The third factor, which included more items than any other factor, indicated that rural citizens maintained a social consciousness within and beyond the community. The fourth factor suggested that rural citizens valued religion and health. The fifth factor suggested that participation in entertainment and leisure activities was important. Finally, the sixth factor indicated the emphasis rural citizens placed on information access.

**Factor one: Education and quality of life.** The first factor included items which suggested that rural citizens valued education and their quality of life. The items which loaded within this factor indicated that rural citizens saw the connection between the value of education, particularly higher education, and an individual's quality of life. The importance of educational access, opportunities to participate in intellectual activities, thinking about education, and college opportunity for youth were included in this factor. This factor's items suggested that rural citizens were cognizant of the importance of education, specifically access and opportunity; however, that importance is juxtaposed with one's quality of life in the rural community.

**Factor Two: Community Identity and Loyalty.** The second factor suggested that rural citizens were concerned about preserving their community through ensuring that it maintained its identity and resident loyalty. This factor included items which indicated that rural citizens had no problem finding interesting things to do, that the community had cultural activities that were of interest to the respondents, and that they were likewise proud of their community as well as open-minded. Feelings of community pride were associated with the belief that schools prepared youth for jobs and for going to college. However, there was an item within this factor related to the existence of economic development opportunities in the community. Although this item might appear to be an outlier, it is plausible to surmise that community pride and loyalty extends beyond the focus of schools and friendships in this rural community.

**Factor three: Social consciousness.** The third factor indicated that the rural respondents valued a social consciousness within and outside their community. Rural citizens indicated that they were current with national issues, were involved in politics, and read regularly. Respondents also tended to volunteer and felt that being involved in the community was important. These five items indicated areas of social consciousness among rural citizens. Other items which loaded in this factor indicated that rural citizens visited with others, spent time with families, and traveled to see other places. These last three items appear to be the venues through which rural citizens demonstrated their social consciousness.

**Factor four: Religion and health.** The fourth factor, although somewhat mixed, suggested that rural citizens valued religion and health as part of their lives. The first factor was related to healthy eating habits. Two items loaded within this factor regarding the importance of religion among rural citizens, specifically participation in activities at a place of worship and attending church regularly. However, this factor's last two items were focused on out of town travel and intellectual activities with friends and neighbors. While the out of town travel item does not support the other items within the factor, intellectual activities with friends and neighbors does support the role of religion for the respondents.

**Factor five: Entertainment and leisure activities.** The fifth factor suggested that rural citizens participated in different entertainment and leisure activities from attending movies to reading to involvement with religious activities. This factor also included items indicating that rural citizens were involved with their local schools as well as civic organizations. The wide array of entertainment and leisure activities among rural citizens suggested that some level of diversity existed among rural citizens in regards to how they spent their leisure time.

**Factor six: Information access.** The sixth and final factor suggested that rural citizens spent time gathering information from multiple sources including television, internet and museums. This factor also in-

cluded an item that indicated that respondents were involved in activities with their friends and neighbors. Likewise, this factor included an item which indicated that respondents spent time thinking about the importance of education. The items included in this factor suggested that access to information was a social function due to the involvement in activities with neighbors and friends. Furthermore, this factor suggested that rural citizens were likely to seek information from a variety of sources in order to perhaps consider different points of view.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The complexity and variance of the factors which were identified in this study suggest that the life of rural citizens is both complex and perhaps contradictory. All six factors which were identified in this study included a mixture of items which created a challenge for labeling and describing each factor. The labels associated with each factor are intended to be representative of the combination of beliefs and values which embody the cultural norms of the rural citizens who participated in the study. The six factors which emerged further suggest that there are differing and perhaps competing beliefs and values present among rural citizens.

It was encouraging that the first factor in this study was related to the value which rural citizens placed on education and quality of life. However, the second factor, community identity and loyalty, explains the contradiction that often exists between pursuing higher education and community values. Although this study suggested that education is valued, it likewise suggested that community identity and pride were closely associated with its value. The order in which the factors loaded, education and the quality of life followed by community identity and loyalty provides some explanation for the challenges which postsecondary administrators and policy makers have faced in promoting postsecondary education access to rural citizens.

The third and fourth factors, social consciousness and religion and health, respectively, further explain the contradictions that exist in rural communities. It is logical to link the third factor, social consciousness, to the second factor, community identity and loyalty; however, it was found in this study that social consciousness extended beyond the rural community. Likewise, social consciousness could be linked to religion and health among the rural citizens. Religion, affiliated with places of worship is often a common thread of communities. It can at times define communities' personae. Health issues are of importance among rural citizens; however, research has indicated that rural citizens often have higher tendencies toward chronic illnesses as well lack of access to adequate healthcare.

Finally, the fifth and sixth factors, entertainment and leisure and information gathering, explained some of the social dynamics among rural citizens in this study. Both factors suggested a high level of diversity

among rural citizens in regards to their social activities. The loading of the items within these last two factors provided insight into the structure and relationship among the items of the previous four factors, specifically the first two factors, education and the quality of life and community identity and loyalty. It is reasonable to conclude that rural citizens and their social networks have been affected by access to the internet, television, and other media. Furthermore, their discussion of these topics transcends many areas of life including schools, church, civic organizations, and discussions with family, friends, and neighbors. This certainly contradicts the stereotype that rural citizens maintain lives of isolation where they are unaware of the world beyond their community.

### **Recommendations for Education Policy**

The following recommendations regarding education policy are provided based upon the six factors that emerged from this study. These recommendations might be most appropriate in similar rural settings where the loss of agriculture-related jobs has resulted in a loss of population or an increase in the number of citizens who commute to a larger metropolitan area for work.

- 1) Educators and policy makers should not underestimate the association rural Americans have with education and quality of life. It is arguable that current practice tends to assert that rural Americans do not necessarily see the connection between the two. It is plausible that the aforementioned barriers such as socioeconomic status (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; St. John, 2003), level of preparation and career preparation expectation (Wilensky, 2007), financial aid (Paulsen & St. John, 1997; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988), and the cost of college (St. John, 2003) continue to be barriers to college attendance, not an absence for an appreciation of how education improves quality of life. Efforts to negate these and other barriers should acknowledge the value associated with education by rural Americans.
- 2) College access programs should also focus on assisting youth in managing the transition from high school to college while maintaining their identity associated with their community. Burnell (2003) alluded to the contradictions between the high school environment and post-high school decisions and the results of this study suggested that rural Americans want to preserve that identity and maintain loyalty. College access programs should foster the development of the possible self (Markus and Nurius, 1986), while acknowledging the influence of social experiences and maintaining one's identity and loyalty to one's community of origin.
- 3) Information regarding college access should be readily available so that rural Americans, including youth and parents, can make informed

decisions. College access materials often tend to focus on marketing the college experience to youth with less need for demystifying the college experience for parents. Parental influence has found to contribute to the decision to attend college (Reagor & Rehm, 1995; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008) and therefore consideration should be given to the information they access and review regarding their children's college attendance plans.

- 4) The potential to cultivate social, cultural, and economic capital should be explicitly stated by college access programs. The results of this study suggested that rural Americans had a high level of social consciousness and concern for their home community. An explanation of how educational attainment affects both the individual and ultimately the community can assist rural youth in managing the transition from high school to college. Likewise, college access programs should leverage the resources of community agencies as identified in the Model of Community Expectancy in order to promote college attendance as an acceptable choice consistent with community norms (Deggs & Miller, 2009, 2011).

### **Implications for Promoting Educational Attainment**

The situation observed in the rural county where this study was conducted mirrors what is occurring in other communities throughout rural America. Sustainability and growth of the rural American way of life continue to be a challenge due in part to the shift to a knowledge-based economy. Loss of agriculture and manufacturing jobs in this rural county and the fact that many citizens commute approximately one hour for work are two strong indicators of the struggles plaguing this rural county. The situation raises concerns about the fate of the rural American way of life and how community values and culture will be preserved. The obligation to preserve rural community values and culture as well as to promote a higher quality of life, ensure community loyalty, raise social consciousness, and promote healthy living are tasks not limited to parents, educators, or other community leaders. It is the obligation of all rural citizens to promote the beliefs and values revealed through this study if the legacy of rural America is to be preserved.

Equally important to preserving the values and culture of rural America is the need to promote educational access and opportunity among citizens if rural America is to once again thrive. It was reassuring to observe that value for education was juxtaposed with quality of life among rural citizens included in this study. This finding suggested that respondents did in fact see education as a means to a better life, expanded career opportunities, and perhaps preservation of the rural American way of life. It is arguable that one other factor identified in this study, community iden-

tity and loyalty, could be in direct conflict with the value placed on educational attainment. The issue then becomes a struggle between education attainment and maintenance of the rural community's identity. This struggle, often promulgated through actions by community members and which is indicative of diverging beliefs and values, creates conflicting messages for rural youth who are attempting to make life decisions. The net result is no clear cultural norm or expectation regarding acceptable educational, career, or life paths. Rural community leaders have an obligation to promote a shared vision which allows for pursuit of higher education while preserving community loyalty and identity. This shared vision must identify a pathway to further and higher education that is clearly defined and reasonably accessible for citizens.

The impact of diverging values and beliefs among rural community members cannot be negated. The five components of the Model of Community Expectancy, including formal education bodies, civic agencies, informal associations, religious affiliations, and home life, provide a paradigm for sorting and identifying values and beliefs. The results of this study provided evidence of the existence of values and beliefs for each component of the model through the six factors which emerged. The emerging factors further suggest the complexity of the stimuli which exist in local communities and affect educational, career, and life decisions. The combined interaction of the components will likely yield mixed messages among the rural community's citizenry. Efforts to promote educational attainment cannot be limited to one single component of the model, as it is more than likely that such responsibility has traditionally rested with formal education bodies. All components of a community have a responsibility to promote educational attainment and to positively impact educational, career, and life decisions.

The task of promoting access and opportunity to higher education in rural America can be daunting when considering the many challenges facing rural American citizens. Differences between long existing ways of rural life and changes to local economies, government and educational structures, and loss of population, often create uncertainty among rural citizens. The factors identified in this study, which are indicative of community beliefs and values, suggest that there is a divergence from rural community life as it was once known. This divergence suggests that perhaps rural community citizens are not as homogenous as once thought and that changes to rural American way of life will likely continue despite efforts to preserve them. What is uncertain is whether ensuring educational attainment among citizens in rural America will be at the cost of losing any and all semblance of shared community identity, culture, and norms.

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