

Rural Working-Class Scholars' Perspectives and Experiences Seeking Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

As the economy became the driving force behind education policy in recent decades, post-secondary education planners and policymakers turned their attention to older adults. In Tennessee, the state launched its *Drive to 55* campaign to increase the number of residents earning postsecondary degrees. Along with these changes came the call for more research to inform practices and policies related to older adult learners. This study sought to understand postsecondary education experiences of adult scholars from rural, low-education counties in Tennessee. Findings demonstrated participants' determination to complete despite initial doubts, the importance of informal peer supports, and the significance of family.

Keywords: *Rural Learner, Older Adult Learner, Working Class Learner, Tennessee Higher Education*

As the economy became the driving force behind education policy in recent decades (Atkins, 2000), post-secondary education planners and policymakers turned their attention to older adults. In Tennessee, the state launched its *Drive to 55* campaign to increase the number of state residents earning postsecondary degrees and offered more scholarships and tuition discounts—in some instances no tuition—to encourage more rural, working-class adults to earn postsecondary degrees (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2017). Along with these changes came the call for more research to “inform and improve practices and policies” (Krause, 2017, para 1) related to older adult learners.

Research Problem

Tennessee's *Drive to 55* campaign aims to increase from 39% to 55% the number of residents with postsecondary degrees, which means adding an additional 79,000 state residents to the current number attaining postsecondary degrees each year. To achieve its goal by 2025, the state must recruit residents 25 and older, more specifically rural adult learners since U.S. Census data indicate Tennessee's population is 93% rural. Less is known about postsecondary access and attainment by working-class adults living in sparsely populated regions, often far from needed services and supports: jobs are scarcer, wages are lower, and unemployment is higher than in more populous state regions. These economic and distance factors, along with the challenges created by jobs and family, make the perspectives and experiences of rural working-class scholars more complex.

Our qualitative study sought to understand experiences of rural, working-class adults in Tennessee who sought postsecondary credentials—their motivation to enter the system, their support systems, and their attitudes about completing. We developed five research questions: 1) What prompted rural adults from low-education counties in Tennessee to seek postsecondary education? 2) What complexities, challenges, and barriers did they experience? 3) What services or programs did they utilize along the way? 4) What was the role of community and family in their experiences?, and 5) What were their perspectives on their ability to complete a postsecondary education?

Background and Context

Rural adults lag behind urban counterparts in degree attainment in the South (Barkley, Henry, & Li, 2005) and in Tennessee (Rural Policy Research Institute, 2006). This gap between urban and rural adults with postsecondary degrees grew from 11% to 14% between 2000 and 2015 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). In rural areas, “low educational attainment is closely related to higher poverty and child poverty rates as well as higher unemployment” (USDA, 2017, p. 1). Lack of skills, knowledge, and experience in rural areas of the South “likely contributed to the slow growth of rural economies relative to their metropolitan counterparts” (Barkley et al., 2005, p. 1). Research has found many distinctions between rural and urban adult learners: different financial situations related to jobs and earnings, different family obligations, and different ways of progressing, such as attending part-time and seeking programs that required less time to complete (Prins, Kassab, & Campbell, 2015); thus, support systems must be different for rural adult learners.

All counties in our study’s recruitment area were identified by the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture as *low education counties*, in which “25 percent or more of residents 25–64 years old had neither a high school diploma nor GED in 2000” (as cited in Rural Policy Research Institute, 2006, p. 6). This statistic on educational attainment, along with the size of the state’s rural population, the growing gap between rural and urban education, and the threat or existence of economic hardship, demonstrates the significance of research that seeks to understand rural, working-class adult learners’ experiences with postsecondary attainment. Rural education scholars have noted a lack of “culturally contextualized inquiry” (McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010, p. 194) that examines the rural learner’s perspectives and experiences. Most research on rural learners has been quantitative, focusing on factors affecting rural learners (e.g., Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010).

McDonough and colleagues (2010) argue that “culturally driven qualitative inquiry can help unpack how these quantified and comparative findings matter to rurality, and how rurality matters to these quantified and comparative findings in relation to educational opportunity” (pp. 194–195). Researchers have clearly demonstrated the need to hear more from this population. In rural Pennsylvania, adults had clear opinions on what was needed to improve their experiences but felt their opinions were not heeded by educational institutions (Coro, 2006). Also, Howley, Chavis, & Kester (2013) demonstrated at a southern community college that listening to rural adults’ voices could make a difference in retention. Our study added to this small but growing body of research which aims to equip educational and institutional policymakers with information that could lead to increased understanding and better, more strategic planning for the rural, working-class adult learner.

Methods

The study focused on low-education rural counties in the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee. After IRB approval, researchers used snowball sampling to recruit six participants. All were 25 or older when they began pursuit of their first postsecondary credential. Five were still enrolled, and one had withdrawn from school.

Three researchers each conducted two individual, hour-long interviews which were transcribed by the fourth researcher, and transcripts were then shared with respective interviewees, who made no additions or revisions to the transcripts. The researchers analyzed data inductively, first through reading line by line and assigning descriptive codes to portions of the data deemed meaningful, then by combining codes into categories, and finally by developing themes. Names of participants are pseudonyms.

Common Themes Related to Pursuit of Postsecondary Education

The following discussion identifies common themes related to degree pursuit by rural working class adults in Tennessee and relates findings to research questions.

“Might as Well”

Motivations to seek postsecondary education, explored in Question 1, ranged from desire for more income and empowerment to the availability of benefits. Rose wanted more money not just for herself but also “to make life a little better for my family.” Tracy, a single mother, expressed similar thoughts: “Just my kids; I mean, that’s really the decision.” Alice wanted “something marketable—a specific occupation.”

Regardless of the motivator, availability of funds was key. Alice said her employer provided benefits: “It’s just sitting there; I might as well utilize it.” Bobby had long thought about postsecondary education, but “in my family, we went to work. . . . Around here, that’s what we did, you know. You weren’t expected to go to school. That cost money.” After his job was eliminated and he received education benefits as part of a severance package, Bobby decided to use the benefits. Derek was completing military service and had no plans for college, but once he learned about military benefits: “I thought it was like really a good thing . . . I can definitely try it.”

“Hard to Step Out”

Question 2 addressed the challenges and complexities of being an older adult seeking a postsecondary degree, and there were many. Initially, self-doubt about their ability to succeed in a postsecondary environment troubled the participants and, in some cases, delayed postsecondary education. Rose said she was encouraged by co-workers to seek teacher certification, “but I was really afraid, you know. I’d been in my little world for so long, and it was hard to step out of that little world.” Derek also experienced some uneasiness. “I’d been out of it for so long. . . . I also don’t like failing, so I was actually a little nervous about even succeeding.” Tracy feared “that it would be too hard or that I would fail or that I wouldn’t be able to make it work—for my family.” Alice feared memory loss would be a factor because of her age. Bobby said he “always worried that I wasn’t going to be smart enough.”

Balancing work and school proved difficult for some participants, and finances were sometimes obstacles. Derek gave up his job when his employer refused to adjust his schedule. Tracy’s

employer was supportive and helped her transition from full to part time work, but “just the culmination of school and work and kids” proved “overwhelming,” she said. She also struggled to support her family, despite financial aid. The money covered school supplies, including a computer, “but it didn’t . . . supplement the time that I lost at work, going from full time to part time. So, another struggle.”

Some participants felt culpable because they were studying rather than attending to family. Rose remembered studying during her child’s ballgame: “I was having these guilt feelings. . . . Maybe I’m not being, you know, the greatest mother in the world.” Bobby talked about the sacrifice of money and time that his family made once he committed to school. “We’ve had to cut back. We’ve got an 11-year-old son that doesn’t—he still doesn’t understand.” For LS, the commute was an obstacle, “on the road back and forth . . . cutting into my study time.” Some semesters, she commuted three times a week while working part time.

Support Comes from Insiders

Question 3 asked participants about the services or supports they used for pursuing postsecondary education. Participants most often identified *insider* support as a key component in postsecondary educational attainment. Informal peer groups were especially prominent in the discussions of five participants. These groups included peer review of papers, study group meetings before tests, and texting groups to discuss questions about an assignment or about a professor’s expectations. Derek was surprised by the level of peer support: “That community was a lot different than I ever expected. . . . Everybody was actually helping each other, working together. That was the biggest plus I think I’ve ever had in college, just that aspect of it.” Bobby described “a little bit of camaraderie there that’s built with, you know, everybody’s kind of going through the same thing.”

While most participants’ stories of support were about current or former students, institutional support services did play a role, particularly for navigating admissions. Alice said her advisor recommended a “good class to start out with . . . and she was right.” Derek turned to the Veterans’ Affairs for support, and Rose recalled that admissions and financial aid office staff were helpful and encouraging. Tracy took advantage of a library tutoring session organized by the community college she attended, but unlike other participants, Tracy did not participate in informal peer support groups. “I know that there were some study groups, but a lot of that—it wouldn’t have worked with my work schedule,” she said. Instead, Tracy relied heavily on the advice of her admissions counselor. “She really helped me understand the expectations.” Tracy appreciated that the advisor kept her appointments and checked on her often. “She was really good.”

Not all stories about institutional service providers were positive. LS said her schedule made it difficult to meet with tutors, and she could not recall using any other campus academic services. “When you’re driving 45 minutes to an hour to get here, and you have classes all day . . . and then you have to go home and do homework, it doesn’t really leave a lot of free time.” She suggested a Facebook chat room would better serve students who commute: “At least you could do it at home.”

Family Matters

Question 4 dealt with the role of family and community in the participants' postsecondary education journey, and data indicated that family was significant, but community less so. Family members offered encouragement, helped at home, and provided insider knowledge. Family also was the stimulus for participants' desires to improve career and earnings. Alice said her family "took turns doing supper and things like that" and she tried to arrange her classes so she wouldn't "put anybody else out." Bobby said his spouse was his most influential supporter, encourager, and defender. "Without her, none of it would be possible," he said.

"I Can Do This"

All of the participants—even Tracy, who had withdrawn from her studies—communicated their intent to continue or complete their education, and most expressed confidence in their ability to do so, answering Question 5.

Prior to his military service, Derek said, college had "not once" been a consideration. But his mindset changed: "I think I can do it now; I feel like I can do it." Bobby said he still sometimes has doubts but is determined. "I've got to [finish]. I don't have a choice." More time in the classroom has made him more comfortable, he said, "Like it's what I should've been doing all along." Tracy said she was forced to withdraw from school because she could not balance work, school, and family, but she plans to return. She described her experience as "good, and encouraging, even though I didn't finish." School is still an option, she said, "So I think when I go back I'll have a little bit more of an advantage than the first time."

Discussion and Conclusions

Availability of funds was key in participants' decisions to seek postsecondary degrees, including employer job benefits, military benefits, and government funds. Adults who had access to benefits were finding ways to manage, sometimes through sacrifice. But the single mom, forced to reduce work to part-time status in order to attend classes, struggled to support her family. Our findings demonstrate that working-class rural adults need financial support to be successful in postsecondary education.

Participants expressed fear of failure or doubts about their abilities to succeed, then discovered once in the classroom that those feelings were unfounded. Despite initial doubts, most participants expressed confidence in or determination to complete. Sharing their stories may help other working-class rural adults find the courage and support to seek postsecondary education. Researchers should consider studies that develop narratives about the experiences of older adults' successes in postsecondary education.

The significance of family cannot be overlooked when planning programs for working-class rural adults. Family was key to motivation and support, and participants' family responsibilities sometimes were misplaced by education responsibilities, resulting in internal conflict for participants. Universities should continue to explore ways to provide more flexibility in course offerings so that degree attainment does not disrupt work and family schedules and responsibilities. The varied needs of participants determined the type of coursework they desired, but all wanted more flexibility. Counter to the trend among universities toward more online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2017), older adults in our study valued face-to-face peer interaction and, in some instances, preferred on-ground courses. More flexibility could take the form of

more blended learning options but also might include taking coursework to the job site or providing on-campus childcare so that parents can attend classes.

Insider support, particularly supports developed and cultivated by fellow classmates or campus communities, played a significant role in perseverance. With one exception, participants turned most often to fellow students in the same classes and to former students for support.

Unfortunately, the only participant who did not develop informal peer support was the only participant who had withdrawn from coursework. Postsecondary institutions may want to consider ways to encourage such informal local support units rather than establishing larger, campus-wide programs.

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