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Policy Brief

Rural, Poor and Working-Class Student Postsecondary Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Policy Lessons Learned for Supporting Future College Success

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In this policy brief, we use research findings to illuminate experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic of U.S. rural college students from poor and working-class backgrounds. We offer institutional, state, and federal policy lessons gleaned from such experiences. We show how rural, poor and working-class students' higher education success was impacted by COVID-19 and how the pandemic highlighted and exacerbated existing systemic geographic and social class barriers faced by such students pursuing college. In turn, we hope postsecondary policymakers at the institutional, state, and federal levels can learn from these experiences to better support rural, poor, and working-class students in the future, even during times of continued crisis.

Rural students from poor and working-class backgrounds¹ (what we, as the researchers, term “rural, poor and working-class students,” for brevity, “RPAWCS”) have perpetually faced issues accessing and completing higher education (Wells et al., 2019). RPAWCS’ relatively low rates of enrollment and attainment are a result of systemic geographic and social class barriers rural, poor and working-class communities face. These barriers include extreme poverty and (un)employment challenges; lack of access to high-speed internet and technology; and isolation from education, healthcare, and transportation resources (McNamee, 2022).

Such issues were brought to light and further exacerbated by the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sano & Mammen, 2022), affecting higher education access and success for RPAWCS at scale. Effects encompassed how pandemic-related economic, safety, and health issues influenced college enrollment and persistence of rural students and poor and working-class students (Gavazzi, 2020; Soria & Horgos, 2020). Finding affordable technology and broadband had impacts on rural students’ and poor and working-class students’ well-being, such as mental health, sense of belonging, and remote learning (McNamee et al., 2020; Soria & Horgos,

2020). As the pandemic continued, issues related to technology and broadband compounded with Latinx RPAWCS’ limited access to college knowledge to affect how and where such students enrolled in college (Puente, 2022).

As is clear, the pandemic illuminated and even heightened the multitude of structural obstacles RPAWCS encounter related to finding success in college. Yet what did we, as postsecondary stakeholders, glean from this pandemic related to crafting policies more effective at supporting RPAWCS toward such success, even during future times of crisis? This question is where our policy brief is situated, detailing through recent research findings² how RPAWCS in higher education were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lessons offered around how postsecondary policymakers at the local, state, federal, and institutional levels can better support RPAWCS’ postsecondary success in the future, both during times of crisis (e.g., gun violence, natural disasters, health pandemics, humanitarian crises) and as established and sustained practices. Informed policies like the ones we outline below can potentially reduce systemic disadvantage faced by RPAWCS in higher education at each of these levels, ultimately creating and sustaining

¹ Rurality is defined as students having grown up in rural areas as defined by the U.S. Census. Social class is defined by a student’s income, resources, education, and parental education and occupation.

² Findings were part of a larger research study (December 2020 to June 2021) on the experiences of seven RPAWCS in college,

based upon the systemic disadvantages they faced around their rural and social class identities. Data sources included (a) three 60- to 90-minute, one-on-one interviews with each participant; (b) two 90-minute focus group interviews with all seven participants; and (c) weekly journal entries of varying lengths written by participants.

equitable postsecondary spaces and outcomes for such students.

Fund Access to Broadband and Affordable Technology

Local, state, federal, and institutional policymakers and state legislators must fund programs and initiatives that foster access to broadband internet and technological tools (such as laptops, software). With increasing expectations for accessing courses, advising meetings, and institutional supports online, access to high-speed broadband is an essential component of the collegiate context, particularly for RPAWCS who often come from and/or reside in locations where internet access is nonexistent or limited and who may not have the resources to acquire the technological tools that their faculty or institutions assume they possess.

The COVID-19 move to remote operations and online programs was difficult for RPAWCS, who struggled to access the internet in rural spaces and afford technological equipment. As decisions were made by colleges and universities about operations going remote during the pandemic, RPAWCS faced layered geographic and social class barriers around access to high-speed internet and reliable technology. RPAWCS in our study noted that they experienced difficulties attending classes in rural spaces that often face barriers to proper broadband access. As one student, David, outlined:

When I was sent home back in March of 2020 ... I was definitely worried about Wi-Fi connection and continuing to take my classes from home.... When I would log in..., I'd be kicked out at least twice a class.... That was just ... stressful.

Affording technology that could handle synchronous virtual classes was an additional barrier. Bernie, another student, summarized:

I think because everything is virtual, it makes it really hard. If you're like me, and if you can't afford a laptop that's powerful enough to go through Zoom, classes will freeze a lot, and then I would kind of be on my own.

To further complicate things, when technology did not work, RPAWCS were isolated in rural areas away from institutional staff and resources who might offer academic and technological support.

As we look beyond the pandemic, institutional policymakers should work alongside IT colleagues, upper-level administrators, and grant or governmental funders to increase efforts to secure RPAWCS' broadband and technology access, such as

programs for providing hot spots and free laptop rentals. Beyond institutional and state support, individual faculty should also offer course-related policies that invite flexibility for students. This flexibility includes offering course outlines while also understanding needs for format shifting or time extensions when RPAWCS are experiencing technological barriers related to rural and social class stressors (Pickett et al., 2022), in addition to options that do not rely on technology when RPAWCS face difficulties securing internet access and hardware.

Foster Sustainable Student Employment Policies

State and federal policymakers and legislators who influence state and federal employee policies must foster sustainable student employment policies that support RPAWCS. When institutions reduce operations or fully close, for any length of time, student employees are often furloughed or not offered alternative work options (such as working remotely). These decisions are detrimental to RPAWCS who receive federal work study aid or use campus employment for financial sustainability. While on-campus work is more flexible and beneficial for RPAWCS who can gain major or career-related experience, existing institutional, state, and federal policies sometimes limit on-campus student employment hours—with the intention of focusing students' time and attention on coursework—and require in-person work. However, these limitations actually force students who need more income into off-campus employment, which is less amenable to their course schedules and academic requirements. Policymakers should consider removing these limitations and encouraging more on-campus hours and remote work options, particularly for RPAWCS, as campus employment is proven to be more flexible and encourage students' belonging and success.

The move to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted RPAWCS. Most of the students in our study had to work to be able to pay for college, due to what they described as the extreme poverty their families faced in their economically distressed rural communities. Yet institutional policies around the logistics of whether and how students could work campus jobs remotely during the pandemic were confusing for them. For example, Daisy discussed her institution's policy regarding students working virtually:

In previous years, [my university] allowed students to hold campus jobs remotely. They specifically changed that this year.... Students

... were suddenly left without a job and forced to go back to campus.... After a lot of pushback from the student body, they changed the policy for remote work, but only if no one else [on campus] was hired for the job.

Students in our study also faced decisions around work experience related to their areas of study. Again, the extreme poverty their rural families faced forced the RPAWCS in our research to work to afford college. Further, the RPAWCS desired to gain professional experience to acquire well-paying jobs after graduation. Yet during the pandemic, RPAWCS were sent home, where jobs and internships in their future career pathways were limited, given rural communities' reliance on working-class industries and isolation from a larger variety of employment types. Therefore, the RPAWCS had to choose other options that could pay them but were often unrelated to their studies or career aspirations. Daisy shared:

Most rural students ... ended up working on farms, working in restaurants or bars, or taking odd jobs like I did [as a groundskeeper].... This drove most rural students back to college ... despite the utter lack of substance in education [during the pandemic].... As a rural student, your option was enroll in classes ... or ... do your best ... to find a meaningful gap year experience in your [rural] area.

Looking beyond COVID-19, state, federal, and institutional policymakers, as well as legislators, can change and adapt student employment policies to aid RPAWCS who may have great financial need due to heightened rural poverty but who may need to work more hours or to work from home when other opportunities are not available in rural spaces. Further, creating partnerships with various industries in rural locations to offer paid internships or career-related positions could benefit RPAWCS who need a combination of income and professional experience.

Establish Policies That Consider RPAWCS' Rural and Social Class Experiences and Barriers

State, federal, and institutional policymakers should establish straightforward and seamless policies that recognize the complex experiences and challenges RPAWCS face in higher education. RPAWCS in our study described the stressful experiences they encountered from the COVID-19 pandemic. For the students who stayed enrolled in college, finding success as RPAWCS became difficult and their mental health suffered. Mary detailed how, in balancing her shortened semester

with her work schedule as a student who needed employment due to rural economic barriers, coupled with vaccine side effects, she felt her health was “fading in and out” during finals. Fatima also found it hard to manage remote courses and work alongside layered issues she and her family were facing related to being rural and poor during such a difficult crisis:

[Remote college] ... only got even more and more challenging.... It's ... so exhausting to keep up with it all the time.... I'm not equipped ... to adapt to such a new style of learning, while also dealing with so many other external factors [related to rurality and social class].

While the RPAWCS were navigating these impacts, they felt their institutions did not always consider the rural and social class barriers that would cause them such stress. For instance, one student described how their institution tried to help low-income students by giving them physical space on campus during the pandemic to store their belongings so they would not have to pay for storage units when they moved back home. However, the students noted that these same institutions did not consider or acknowledge that RPAWCS would also face rural barriers layered on top of social class challenges, such as being isolated from broadband, career opportunities, and other resources.

Thus, as higher education stakeholders plan for future crises, institutional, state, and federal policymakers must recognize how rural *and* social class factors may impact RPAWCS both separately and together and how to use policy to address such issues. For example, policymakers at all levels could invest in further mental health services, including rural, poor and working-class areas where healthcare is limited and may be unaffordable if it is available. Additionally, institutions could train faculty on how to teach online so that they can make the experience more meaningful and less burdensome on RPAWCS.

In addition, leaves of absence were a specific issue that emerged in our study. While all RPAWCS in our study continued remotely at first, Daisy and Bernie ended up taking leaves of absence from their institutions. Bernie described facing issues finding technology and broadband to engage in remote learning and feeling isolated in his rural area when he encountered such barriers. He found it easier to take a leave of absence than deal with such stressors:

I was there for my very first semester of college.... and then we got sent home.... I knew [then] I was going to go on leave. I hated online school even when we were on campus.... Everything was online for the December exams.

And after that, I was like, “Oh hell no, I’m not doing this.” No form of torture would’ve gotten me to pay to do online school from home [in my rural area].

Beyond the pandemic, whether RPAWCS need time off because of societal crisis impacts or personal circumstances that preclude them from continuing at the present time, RPAWCS will face difficult life circumstances that may catalyze tough choices about persisting in higher education. RPAWCS who stay in college face barriers to managing external circumstances alongside academics and employment. Other RPAWCS may decide that it is best to take a leave of absence and work a community-based job to lessen stress from these difficulties.

While many college students face decisions about continuing their education for various reasons, the choices RPAWCS must make are a direct result of layered systemic geographic and social class barriers they face, including limited access to affordable technology and broadband; fewer job and career opportunities in their poor and working-class, remote rural communities; and life circumstances that increase the likelihood of leaves of absence. While there are obviously standards and rules around state higher education and federal accreditation, these systemic barriers to RPAWCS’ postsecondary success can be lessened with local, federal, state, and institutional policies that support leaves of absence but also account for students’ needs to seamlessly move in and out of higher education in ways that are both flexible to their needs and encourage reenrollment and completion. This type of intentional policymaking may include publicizing and making clear procedures for leaving and returning, ensuring low-cost and low-maintenance return processes (for example, students not having to reapply or pay application fees to come back), not forcing RPAWCS who have taken a leave of absence to live in residential housing as part of campus rules around students living on campus, and even assigning advisors who confer with RPAWCS about leaving and coming back to campus.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated systemic disadvantages that rural, poor and working-class populations pursuing higher education consistently face. Of course, other geographic areas also may experience disadvantages, yet rural communities face more dire circumstances related to technological access and economic opportunities, with even greater disparity in impoverished rural communities (Niccolai et al., 2022; Zahnd et al., 2022). Layering these rural, poor and working class-related structural barriers with COVID-based changes to higher education heightened systemic barriers to RPAWCS’ postsecondary success. RPAWCS faced more complex structural challenges related to accessing broadband and affordable technology than their peers (Boerngen & Rickard, 2021), as well as unique difficulties identifying sources of stable income due to bounded rural economies, geographic isolation, and limited ability to work remotely (Mattingly & Schaefer, 2015). Thus, these factors influenced not only RPAWCS’ college access (Puente, 2022) but also success when enrolled during COVID-19. The students then felt a forced choice: stay enrolled or pursue other avenues back home in their rural, poor and working-class communities that might align better with their circumstances.

COVID-19 illuminated gaps in institutional and state policies related to the layered geographic and social class disadvantages RPAWCS face in pursuing higher education. It is critical that institutional, state, and federal policymakers learn from the pandemic to understand barriers faced by RPAWCS pursuing college, in turn shaping more equitable policies to better support such students’ higher education success, even during times of crisis. In this brief we provide tangible policy recommendations to engage in such work and hope that postsecondary policymakers look to their policies and shape them similarly, with an intention to create equitable higher education experiences and outcomes for rural students from poor and working-class backgrounds.

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