Keeping Sight of the Forest and the Trees: Rethinking Diversity and College Opportunity for Rural Populations in Oregon

Andrew Korich, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Higher Education
Texas Tech University

June Convening Sponsored By:
Oregon Community College Association & The Ford Family Foundation
June 25, 2015
Portland, Oregon
The Current State of Rural America

Rural Diversity
- People
- Communities

Postsecondary Access & Choice Challenges for Rural Residents

A Spotlight on Oregon

Opportunities for Improvement
The Current State of Rural America
- As of 2010, approximately 59.5 million Americans live in rural communities.

### Change in U.S. Rural Population, 1980–2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1980</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural Population</td>
<td>59,492,267</td>
<td>59,061,367</td>
<td>61,656,386</td>
<td>59,494,813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of U.S. Population</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census.gov
Three-quarters of U.S. counties are classified as non-metropolitan.
Contrary to popular belief, rural America is not overwhelmingly white.

- American Indian reservations, border states, Deep South
- Immigration patterns

Rural residents experience higher poverty rates than those living in cities and suburbs

- More than just an individual problem
- Relationship to local economic changes
Non-metropolitan counties have experienced greater population loss over the last few decades

- Youth outmigration ("brain drain")
- Scarcity of critical skills and knowledge

Some rural algebra:

- High Poverty + Decreasing Population = Shrinking Tax Base
- Shrinking Tax Base + High Need for Services = Program Cuts
On the bright side…

- Exceptional cultivation of talented youth

- Growing economic opportunities in emerging industries
  - Sustainable agriculture
  - Renewable energy
  - Tourism & recreation

- Increased connectivity though broadband expansion efforts
  - Opportunities in education
  - Opportunities in E-Commerce
Rural Diversity
Rural diversity can be thought of in two ways:

- Rural places as home to diverse individuals and groups, each with corresponding characteristics and challenges

- Seeing “rural” as a heterogeneous category made up of distinctly, and substantively, different communities, each with characteristics that impact the lives of residents
RURAL DIVERSITY

RURAL AMERICA

- First-Generation
- Low-Income
- Military Enlistees
- Racial Minorities
- Adult Learners
- Immigrants
Minorities & Immigrants

- Not unusual in rural places
  - Result of Southern slavery
  - Native American reservations
  - Migrant agriculture laborers
  - Refugees
    - Hmong (1970s)
    - Sudan, Bosnia, Croatia (1990s)
  - Latin American immigrants

Poverty & First-Generation

- Rural residents have long had lower education levels
  - Exacerbated by geographic isolation
  - Connection between education level and local employment opportunities
  - Relationship between poverty and education access/attainment

- With fewer rural residents holding degrees, rural youth are more likely to be first-generation college students
Student Veterans

- Recent military conflicts and new G.I. Bill have dramatically increased the number of combat veterans on college campuses.
  - Cultural differences, experience, and age
  - Physical and mental health concerns
  - Requires a re-thinking of what types of student services should be added
- These students often choose institutions near military bases, especially community colleges, when using education benefits.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of Military Enlistees</th>
<th>% of Overall U.S. Population (2010)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>20-44</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
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</table>
“Rural” as a Heterogeneous Category

- In research, policy, and everyday life, rural communities are treated as a monolithic group.
  - Agricultural interests can dominate policymaking, despite comprising a decreasing share of national and rural employment.

- Accordingly, the vast complexities of rural life are overlooked or ignored.

- “America today has many rural Americas.” (Lichter & Brown, 2011, p. 568)
When we treat “rural” as a singular group, we miss important variations in rural places:
Postsecondary Access & Choice Challenges for Rural Residents
Students from non-metropolitan counties are only 80% as likely to enroll in any postsecondary education within 2 years of completing high school.

Students from these communities are considerably more likely to choose a two-year college over a four-year institution.

- Best option vs. only option quandary

More likely to attend public institutions at the two-year and four-year levels.
POSTSECONDARY ACCESS & CHOICE CHALLENGES

- Students from non-metro counties also less likely to choose selective institutions

- In these places, persistent child poverty (20+ years) has a startling detrimental effect on postsecondary enrollment and significantly alter choice patterns.

- Local industry and employment opportunities influence college access and choice
  - Connections between education and employment are crucial
Distance from postsecondary institutions (predictably) influences access and choice

- When more time is spent commuting, there is less time for studies, work, and family
- This obstacle may effectively reduce or eliminate the options available to students
- Without choice, do we truly have access?

Rural residents are more likely to live in a county with no postsecondary institution compared to urban and suburban residents.

- Opportunities in online education, but this is not for everyone and comes with corresponding obstacles
MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

A Spotlight on Oregon
Rurality in Oregon

- **2010 Census Data**
  - New Urbanized Areas: Albany, Grants Pass, Walla Walla
  - Rural population: 726,692 (18.97%)
  - Rural land area: 98.8%

- **Unique definitions**
  - Urban Community: A specified area with at least 50,000 residents
  - Urban Rural: At least 10 miles by road from an urban community
  - Rural: At least 30 miles by road from an urban community
  - Isolated Rural: Rural community at least 100 miles from a community of 3,000 or more residents
  - Frontier Rural: Rural community at least 75 miles from a community of 2,000 or more residents
A SPOTLIGHT ON OREGON

Rural and Urban Oregon

Image Source: Crandall & Weber (2005)
Isolated Rural Oregon

Image Source: Crandall & Weber (2005)
A SPOTLIGHT ON OREGON

Isolated Rural Oregon

Image Source: Crandall & Weber (2005)
What comes to mind when thinking of rural Oregon?
Rural Diversity in Oregon

- Geography
  - Pacific coast, Cascade range, High desert, Willamette Valley

- Demographics
  - Rural Oregon may still be predominantly White, but there are important racial, ethnic, and cultural variations in these places.
  - Other social metrics:

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<tr>
<th>Non-Metro Social Indicators (2004)</th>
<th># of Non-Metro Counties in OR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substandard Housing</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement Destination</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Metro Recreation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Education, Low Employment, Persistent Child Poverty</td>
<td>1 (each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent Poverty, Population Loss</td>
<td>0 (each)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rural Diversity in Oregon

- **Industry**
  - Shift from resource dependence to mixed manufacturing and high tech, but rural communities have been largely left out
  - Top Commodities (> $300 million in 2013):
    - Greenhouse/Nursery, Cattle, Hay, Milk, Grass seed, Wheat

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<tr>
<th>Non-Metro Industry Dependence Type (2004)</th>
<th># of Non-Metro Counties in OR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal/State Gov.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Specialized</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Postsecondary Education

- In 2007, about 31% of urban residents held a bachelor’s degree, compared to only 19.5% of those in rural counties
  - Share for associate degrees was about the same for both groups
- In a cohort of high school freshmen in 2005-2007 (Pierson & Hanson, 2015):
  - 55% of rural students in Oregon enrolled in college, compared to 63% of urban students
  - 78% of rural students persisted to the second year (83% for non-rural)
  - No difference between groups regarding immediate enrollment
  - More rural students first enrolled in a two-year, public institution in OR
  - Rural Hispanic students were more likely than their non-rural counterparts to enroll in college
Postsecondary Education

- Mobility/proximity remains an issue as many rural Oregonians live several hours from the nearest university
  - This also ties closely to issues of income and first-generation status

- Oregon State announced a $60 million forest science complex aimed at improving rural economic prospects

- A 2010 Oregon Employment Department report notes the need for more research on rural Oregonians and higher education.
Opportunities for Improvement
“Place Not Race”

- Shift efforts to diversify campuses and increase opportunity to see where a student comes from, as opposed to race alone.
- As diverse places, rural communities are a rich source of underrepresented and non-traditional college students.
  - Design outreach and institutional aid efforts accordingly
- Can aid a broad spectrum of populations in need
- This re-thinking should permeate recruitment/outreach, institutional aid provision, and academic research.
OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Administrators and Institutions

- Understand the rural populations specific to your state/region

- Review institutional aid programs

- Help students see connections between their education and local employment opportunities

- Support services and programs
  - How do current services meet the needs of the specific populations you serve? How might current offerings need to change to serve the diverse populations in rural communities?
  - Retention is more cost-effective than attrition!
OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Policymakers

- Understand who comprises rural America
- Understand the effects of policy changes on vulnerable populations
- Expand Pell Grants and other low-income grant aid
- Develop creative ways to fund rural students while connecting education to employment opportunities

Researchers

- Conduct more research on rural populations and postsecondary education
  - Establish partnerships!
- Account for diversity in the “rural” category
- Study financial aid changes and their impact on rural populations and the various sub-populations that reside in these communities
Remember:
Postsecondary education is essential for successful economic development!
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