Educational Success and the Transition to Adulthood for First Generation Rural Students

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Attaining a college degree is increasingly important in today’s society. The college application and search process is influenced by students’ backgrounds as well as their parents’ education. Studies show that Families in rural areas tend to have lower incomes and fewer adults have college degrees, creating a challenge for students to access the resources and support necessary to successfully navigate the college application process. This past summer I conducted sociological research on the transition to adulthood for young adults in Maine. Our study focused on the college application process for thirty educationally successful adults from the most rural state in the US: Maine. We examined the similarities and differences in the approaches used by first-generation and traditional college students in their search processes within this rural context.

A major part of the study was fitting our research questions into the existing sociological literature. We addressed the gaps that exist in the literature by using a qualitative approach to investigate the college search process for both first-generation students (neither parent attained a Bachelor’s degree) and traditional college students (at least one parent attained a Bachelor’s degree or higher).

Our data is based on thirty in-depth interviews with young adults (ages 24-34) who received a scholarship from a statewide agency as seniors in high school and graduated from college in Maine. 57% of our sample was categorized as first-generation and 30% qualified as traditional college students. The remaining 13% had at least one parent who had completed a postsecondary associate’s degree or certificate program.

We found the parents’ education played a major role in determining each respondents’ approach to the college search and application process. Two approaches emerged from the data, the “Student-Driven Approach” in which 13 of the 17 first-generation students were characterized, and the “Collaborative Approach” consisting of 8 of the 9 traditional students. The “Student-Driven Approach” was characterized by students being primarily responsible for all activities related to getting to college including researching institutions, completing applications, meeting deadlines, and finding ways to finance their education. In the “Collaborative Approach” students and parents were both actively engaged with the college search and application process, splitting the associated tasks more or less equally. Parents who were college graduates were much more likely to take an active role by offering direct assistance and support in the college application process than parents who did not attend college.

In addition to parental education, we examined the ways that growing up in a rural context affected our respondents’ college aspirations, planning, and search and application processes. Two important influences of rural life were the small town culture associated with geographically isolated communities and the accompanying notion of “everybody knows everybody.” Although college was not always the norm in these small towns, communities acted as another source of support in the decision making of our sample. During their high school years, schools encouragement of college often helped students pursue a higher education.

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