“Kind of a Make-Your-Own Process”: Examining the College Search and Application Process for Educationally Successful Rural Students in Maine

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While the transition to adulthood has always confronted young people with a host of new changes and obstacles, today’s youth in particular are faced with the challenge of adapting to the rapidly increasing necessity of a college degree to ensuring their future access to desirable job opportunities, economic stability, and financial security. For disadvantaged youth, the path to attaining a college education is especially onerous yet no less imperative. Our research this summer sought to investigate one of the first steps in attaining a college degree—the college search and application process during high school—among one such disadvantaged group: rural, first-generation college students.

The college search and application process in general and for rural students in particular is an understudied area in the existing body of sociology of education literature. For our study, we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews to gather detailed data on the experiences of 30 adults between the ages of 24 and 34 who were educationally successful in high school and went on to attain a four-year degree. Each of our study participants received a scholarship from an independent agency to help fund their education at a college or university within the state of Maine, and each one elected to continue living and working in Maine after graduation. Our sample was composed of 17 first-generation college students, 9 respondents who had at least one parent complete a four-year degree, and 4 respondents who had at least one parent complete an associate’s degree (these four students were excluded from analysis due to insufficient data, but their experiences indicate a possible area for future research). 66% were from rural areas according to a classification scheme devised by the National Center for Education Statistics; however, we found that aspects of Maine’s status as the most rural state in the US affected the lives of nearly all the respondents in our sample.

In general, we found that growing up in a rural environment impacted respondents’ access to helpful resources throughout the college search and application process regardless of parental education. Previous quantitative studies have shown that in comparison to urban areas, rural areas have fewer college-educated residents, and this dearth of community role models and resources has a potential negative impact on the college aspirations of youth that we observed in our respondents’ experiences. During data analysis, two primary approaches to the college search and application process emerged, which we dubbed collaborative and student-driven. Collaborative approaches were defined by active involvement in the search and application process by both parents and students, while student-driven approaches were typified by high school students being primarily or solely responsible for any and all activities and deadlines along the road to college. We found that first-generation students were most likely to have experienced student-driven college search and application processes, while “traditional” college students benefited from the parental involvement typical of the collaborative approach. We believe that this breakdown between first-generation students and others is related to parents’ relative experience or inexperience with getting to college. This supports the findings of previous studies, which have shown that parents who have attended college themselves pass along relevant knowledge to their children and are more involved in children’s future planning. On the other hand, parents who have not attended college lack firsthand experience and advice to offer their children even though among our sample they almost always encouraged their children’s college aspirations. Preliminary evidence suggests that first-generation parents may become more involved in the college search and application process if they have alternative means of obtaining relevant and useful knowledge; for example, parents who witness older children navigate the process may be better prepared to aid younger children later on. Additional research is necessary to confirm this finding.

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