Land, Memory, and Power

Collective Movements to Revolutionize Higher Education

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ASHE

ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Perspectives on Rural Student Success: Evidence from a Multi-Institutional Study

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NSSE national survey of student engagement

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What's your relationship with rurality?

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What we know about rural learners

- Rurality is complex & difficult to define – likewise, rural learners. Traditional operationalizations use federal classifications, population thresholds, and sociocultural characteristics.
- Rural learners reside all over the US and represent a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, sexual orientations, and disability statuses.
- Rural students have lower rates of college enrollment & degree attainment.

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What we know about institutions that serve rural students

- Not enough
- Concentration on **access**, **preparation** & **enrollment**, and **rural students' own experiences versus the study of institutional characteristics or conditions** or comparative assessments of institutional effectiveness for rural students
- Some **identified supports** include on-campus engagement & participation in co-curricular activities, structural diversity, and support from their social or home communities

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A fresh opportunity to study rural learners & institutions that serve them

NSSE national survey of student engagement

- **Est. 2020**
- **~ 60% of 4yr. institutions have NSSE data**
- **Asks students about effective educational practice**
- **Expanded demographic items – *new in 2023, students' home zip code***

"What is the 5-digit ZIP code of your home address during your last year of high school?"

With support from the **ECMC Foundation Rural Impact Initiative** to deepen the postsecondary field's understanding of rural learners so all students can unlock their fullest potential and achieve career success.

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Our framing inspirations

Ecological Systems: student success is shaped by the interaction of multiple contexts such as individual characteristics, institutional environments, and the broader rural communities in which students are embedded

Rural Cultural Wealth: recognizing the inherent strengths, knowledge, and assets of rural communities focusing on their resourcefulness, ingenuity, familism, and community sustainability

Organizational Learning Theory: the collection of individuals on campuses and in institutions are agents responsible for creating conditions that produce equitable outcomes

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What we wanted to learn

1. **Who are today's rural learners in higher education in terms of social identities & student characteristics?**
2. **What characterizes the 4-year institutions at which rural learners enroll?**
3. **What do rural learners experience in terms of engagement in effective educational practices – including nature & quality of interaction, perceptions of support and sense of belonging?**
4. **What are the student engagement characteristics of institutions that engage rural students at high levels? In what ways are these institutions exemplary engaging institutions?**

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How we learned it

NSSE national survey of student engagement

Data from the **2023-2025** administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement

- **50,410** rural learners enrolled at **872** institutions
- Item: "what is the 5-digit ZIP code of your home address during your last year of high school."
- Matched to ZIP codes where more than 50% of the population is in a rural area as defined by the Census Bureau
- Examined 3 forms of engagement: *Engaging Academics*, *Engaging Interactions*, *Engaging Environments*

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What we wanted to learn and how we learned it

1. Who are **today's rural learners** in higher education in terms of social identities and student characteristics?

2. What characterizes the **4-year higher education institutions** at which rural learners enroll?

We did a whole lot of descriptives. See our paper!

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What we wanted to learn and how we learned it

3. What **do rural learners experience** in terms of engagement in effective educational practices – including nature and quality of interaction, perceptions of support and sense of belonging?

4. What are the student engagement characteristics of institutions that **engage rural students at high levels**? In what ways are these institutions **exemplary engaging institutions**?

We did a whole lot of cluster analyses and representation tests.

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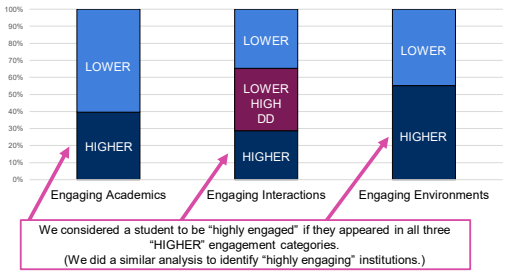

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Highly Engaged Rural Learners

First-Years

- Biological science, health professions
- In-person courses
- Living on campus
- Greek, athlete
- Graduate degree aspirations
- Black or African American, MENA
- Women
- More time preparing for class, co-curriculars, work on campus, work overall, community service, commuting to campus

Seniors

- Biological sciences, education, health professions, social service professions
- In-person or hybrid courses
- Greek, athlete
- Continuing generation
- Graduate degree aspirations
- Black or African American
- LGBQ+
- Women
- More time preparing for class, co-curriculars, working on campus, community service, commuting to campus. Less time working off campus or providing care for dependents

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Highly Engaging Institutions for Rural Learners

- Doctoral-granting institutions, very high research productivity
- Bachelor's-granting institutions, Arts & Sciences
- Mid East, Southeast
- Large cities, midsize suburbs, rural regions
- Private, not for profit
- Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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So what?

- Rural students are **diverse**! Rural students are **everywhere**!
- Our **rural learner typologies** gave insight into the experiences and identities of highly engaged rural learners with **notable affirmation** for African American, Middle Eastern or North African, and LGBQ+ populations
- **Highly engaged rural learners** participate in high-impact practices (HIPs), co-curriculars, athletics, and Greek-letter organizations. Supports such as working on campus and childcare could help.

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What's next?

- **Learn more about highly engaging institutions for rural learners.** *Are you surprised? What are you doing to support rural learners?*
- **Explore initial impressions**:
  - A strong sense of rural community and unity and who the institution serves
  - Reflective of communities surrounding the campus
  - Attention to belonging & meaningful relationships and opportunities for rural learning success
- **Help institutions** identify rural learners, act on their data

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Thanks for joining us!

And thank you to ECMC Foundation for their financial support which made this research possible.

Find more of our work on rural learners (including research briefs, slides and paper) here:

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